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Omaha Oll, THE MASKED TERROR;

OR,
Deadwood Dick in Danger.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK," "CLOVEN HOOF,"
"DOUBLE DAGGERS," "BUFFALO BEN," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

DEL NORTE!—THE WONDERFUL EL GAMIN.

DEL NORTE!

The Monaco of America.

The liveliest little town of its size in Southern Colorado. It is situated upon the south bank of the Rio Grande river, near where it turns out of the San Louis valley from its eastward course, and runs nearly direct south through New Mexico.

It was only started a few years ago, in consequence of being on the Overland route to the Rockies, and is not much of a place—probably contains between nine hundred and a thousand souls—with a class of citizens made up of all nationalities, nearly, although Spanish blood predominates.

Not much of a place for commerce is this Del Norte, nor is gold to be found within fifty miles of the locality. Yet it is undeniably a fast, lively place. Constant emigration into the Rockies, which are fast becoming settled, sustains Del Norte, in a measure, while its gambling repute attracts adventurers and rascals in large numbers. Its population is of this restless type, who are ever wandering from place to place, seeing what there is to see.

These Del Norteans are not naturally inhospitable to strangers, but among the gambling fraternity, who at times rule the town, there is a ruffianly set of bummers, and herders from the immense cattle ranches that abound upon the fifty-by-twenty-mile prairie immediately back of the little town, who are brutish and cruel; reckless devils who shoot and kill often upon little or no provocation.

From Del Norte, which stands partly upon a river bluff, a beautiful view of the herding prairies, as they stretch in gentle billows away toward the filmy mountains, whose hoary peaks are snow-capped the year around, can be obtained. Here are dwellings—mostly haciendas or Mexican farm-houses; there, great herds of cattle are grazing. These black masses upon the prairie, which are herds belonging to different parties, may be seen dotted down like groves or patches of timber in the distance. A peculiarly wild and interesting life is this stock-herding.

The town is rather prettily laid out, with a few streets, and maybe a hundred dwellings, some of which are generally unoccupied. And you need not be surprised to find a

gambling den in each of these tenanted habitations.

For women gamble in Del Norte as well as in Monaco, and some of the black-eyed Spanish girls are adepts at cards, and at winning hearts.

But the main resort of this town, of which the world knows so little, is the "Oriental Palace," a noble structure of Mexican build, artistically finished and richly furnished, with only one floor and a balcony up near the awning roof, where two bands discourse music the whole day and part of the night, a decoy to draw unsuspecting strangers into the master gambling-room of Western America.

There was but one floor, but upon this floor and in under the roof far above, you could pack away half a dozen average buildings.

Imagine a tiled floor as smooth and evenly-laid as a glass surface, three hundred feet long by two hundred wide, and fitted with luxurious chairs and sofas of Mexican manufacture, marble-top card, faro and keno tables, with accompanying appliances, and long bars behind which all kinds of drinks from champagne to Taos whisky are kept, dispensed, and

carried by Mexican girls, in short dresses, blue stockings and red slippers.

From above come softly-modulated strains of bewitching music, below are gracious, fascinating senoritas; the average man needs but to step inside this palace, and he is a "goner," so long as his cash holds out.

Evening is the time when the excitement at the "Oriental" waxes the hottest, when all the population of the town, save those who may chance to be anti-gamblers or have "private snaps" of their own, are out to witness the sport, and mayhap take a hand.

Faro, keno, roulette, billiards and pool, besides ordinary games from eucher to dominoes and checkers, are played here, so that a visitor can have no excuse for not playing but a blank refusal, if he knows aught of any game at all. And skilled gamblers, too, are two-thirds of these Del Norteans, while not behind them rank these rough cattle-herders of the San Luis valley.

It was one evening at the beginning of December —, the close of Del Norte's nearly perpetual summer. The night was breathless and sultry, with only a very faint breeze fanning up from the sullen, dark waters of the murmuring Rio Grande, as it swept by through its channel to the far-away gulf.

The Oriental Palace was nevertheless crowded—crowded with men of rough, and men of dashing appearance; women whom dissipated life had wrecked of their personal charms, and women and maidens who had but recently launched forth into this gay, wildly-reckless existence.

Sirens, too, are some of these passionate, black-eyed Spanish women; more than loveable when not crossed, but very devils, when their ire is aroused.

All the tables were full, to-night, and many were there strolling about through the great building, some alone and distrustful, and others in company with fascinating senoritas, or gay cavaliers. A great colonization caravan had that day stopped in Del Norte, to remain a week for repairs and to stock up, and to this was owing the fact of such a great attendance at the Oriental.

There was a table at which presided a man named Captain Bill Monte, who challenged the world at that simple but interesting game, dominoes—a game, by the way, which you are not likely to find in the general gambling den.

But this Capt. Monte was an expert, and his little game won him nearly as much as other "peelers" won from higher games. He had a system of gambling by dominoes which I have seen in but one place East, and that was in Philadelphia.

Before the game commenced, you were to buy twenty dollars' worth of round ivory checks, if for a small game; or if it was to be a "full tilt," which is more generally played, three hundred dollars' worth. These checks are numbered 5, 10, 15 and 20; therefore, on a deposit of three hundred dollars, you receive a given number of these checks.



DEADWOOD DICK DECEYED

and deposit them in the drawer on your side of the table. Your opponent has a like number, and the denomination of each check is supposed to represent so many dollars. The game then commences, and as in the regular game of dominoes, you each have five dominoes. In the event that "double six" is not drawn, and your opponent has the next largest double, which is "five," he sets it, and counts ten, and you are required to give him one of your "ten" checks. In a few moments, it may chance that you make fifteen or twenty, and receive that number's worth of checks from your contestant.

In case he blocks the game, which is one of the "points" of it, and you are obliged to draw the remaining blocks, whatever the count be upon those dominoes, be it twenty-five, sixty-five or eighty, you are to give to him in checks, which is fat in his larder, he being the banker and you having to pay him for more checks, in case you wish another game. This game in Del Norte they call *elotre*. In Philadelphia it is more simplified and less exciting, three dollars' stake more generally taking the place of three hundred.

This description may possibly prove interesting to some of my readers, and is destined in the future to gain in popularity as a fair and honest gambling game, with few chances to cheat in it.

Captain Monte was a large, smooth-faced man, dark in complexion, with a low, beetling forehead, piercing black eyes, and a habitual expression of evil cunning worn upon his face. Next to Wild Bill Hickox, he was conceded to be the best revolver-shot upon the "middle" border, and not unlike Wild Bill,* once he learned of his master-accomplishments in that line, and that the people feared him, he made a ruffian of himself at every opportunity.

Around Monte's *elotre* table this evening, a crowd had collected, watching the wonderful game of luck and science.

Monte sat upon his side of the table, coolly winning the game at every deal, and fleeing an impetuous Southern youth, a member of the caravan, by the way, out of his last shilling. The man played straight-forward and unhesitatingly; he had made ten thousand dollars at his game, and what if he did lose occasionally? He could soon win back.

At last the Southerner arose from the table, a desperate expression upon his haggard face—a wild gleam in his eyes, that strong drink had rendered bloodshot.

"You have robbed me of my last penny, you devil!" he hissed, between his clenched teeth, "but I've not had enough yet. I'll rob my wife of her money and stake it, but what I will get back that which I have lost. Then, if I win, I'll put a bullet through your skull!"

Monte smiled, and nodded, as the youth, whose creole blood had been fired, shook his fist and strode away.

"Look-out for a suicide directly!" he laughed, grimly. "Any gentleman got confidence enough in his dominoistic abilities to take a game?"

"There is!" a voice immediately replied, and a young man of handsome figure and stately carriage, pushed forward through the crowd. "I have just cleaned out the heaviest faro bank in the establishment, and if you've got any money to lose, now is your chance to lose it!"

And the stranger folded his arms across his chest and gazed coolly at Bill Monte.

No one had seen him in Del Norte before; that he was a stranger was certain, when Bill Monte knew him not. His face was a bronzed but handsome one, with bold, regular features, and an eye of jet, as cool and unwavering as could well be. His hair, worn long, in under a Spanish herder's hat, fell in waves over his shoulders, and he wore a slight mustache and imperial. His attire was American, although a Spanish serape, fringed with a chain of pure gold, was worn over his athletic shoulders.

"And you think you can clean me out just as easily as you cleaned out the faro bank, eh?" Bill Monte chuckled, as he dexterously mixed the dominoes. "Do you understand the game we play?"

"Perfectly, sir," the other replied, counting out a number of bills from a huge wallet. "My name is El Gamin, if you want to know with whom you are to play."

El Gamin deposited three hundred dollars upon the stack-board at one end of the table, and Monte covered it, after which a package of checks was dealt El Gamin, and the same number retained by Monte.

The game then began.

Monte sat the double-six, per rule, and El Gamin six-tray, which counted fifteen, for which he received ivorys.

Six bouts were played, with the most game on Monte's side, but then El Gamin blocked it upon deuces, and Monte was forced to rake in the undrawn dominoes.

Therefore, El Gamin got the game-count, and his own deposit money, with checks enough for "second horse." These checks are redeemed for their face value at the end of the game.

Once more the bones were shuffled, and played, and again El Gamin blocked the game upon his opponent, and received a heavy count, which put out the game, besides leaving him with over three hundred dollars' worth of checks, above investment. These he retained for a new game.

And, amid applause, he won the game, at the end

* Wild Bill has been made a hero in story and upon the stage, and now that he is dead, perhaps it is best not to haul him over the fire, but the western border never knew of a man that more deserved a rope and the limb, than he, despite the fact that he made several good scouts, before he became what he was, when Jack McCall avenged his brother's death, in Deadwood—a dissolute bravo and cut-throat.

of which he got two hundred dollars' worth of checks cashed, aside from enough to continue.

Again the game began. Again he won! Not only once, but ten times; ten straight games, at the end of which he came off twenty-five hundred dollars ahead of investment.

Bill Monte was by this time furious with rage at his ill-luck.

"You are a devil!" he cried; "you have infatuated these bones. But you shall either lose or win all. I have eight thousand dollars in the Denver Bank, and it is the last I have in the world, for you've cleaned me; and I'll bet that eight thousand dollars I win the next game!"

"I accept!" said El Gamin, almost unconcernedly.

CHAPTER II.

THE HOME OF THE HARRISES.—A STRANGE MESSAGE. GREAT excitement now prevailed.

The news spread like wildfire through the palace gambling-house; crowds surged around the *elotre* table; all other games were suspended, and the gambling-tables loaded down with eager men and women, who wished to get a glimpse of this wonderful domino-monarch, El Gamin, who was to play Bill Monte for all he was worth. And half a hundred of Bill Monte's backers, who were herdsmen and of the most ruffianly type of men, stood close at hand, ready to "climb" this new light in the gaming arena, should Bill Monte give the word.

And as many or more Del Norteans stood, with hands resting upon revolvers, ready to back El Gamin, if necessary, for Bill Monte was hated and feared by all, and the Del Norteans held a grudge against him worth wiping out.

So that, from all standpoints, the situation within that great gaslit edifice, looked peculiarly interesting.

The hands upon the balcony far above were playing in concert a grand operatic melody; a strange hushed murmur ran riot; everybody was breathlessly expectant.

Bill Monte was going to stake his last dollar against the same amount put up by this unknown, handsome El Gamin, that he would win the game!

Eight thousand dollars!

A comfortable fortune, and though it was above the regular line of betting in Del Norte, at Monaco it would oftentimes be considered an insignificant sum, where princely fortunes are risked upon a single game of chance.

As the game was of so large a figure, no checks were purchased on deposit money; Monte gratuitously furnished these, and the game began. And the game ran:

Monte led with double-five, making ten; El Gamin blank-five—also ten; Monte six-five; El Gamin blank-six; Monte drew eight dominoes, and played tray-five; and so ran the game, El Gamin eventually blocking the game on blanks.

Monte swore like a trooper, and as if to intimidate his opponent, drew a six-shooter and laid it upon the table. El Gamin stared a moment; then repeated this performance, his revolver being a heavy Derringer, of large bore.

"Guess you meant shoot, didn't you?" he said, laying his down, already cocked.

"Guess you'll find out!" Bill Monte growled, sullenly, glancing at the check he had written, to see that no one had disturbed it. "Go on."

They played and Monte won.

Each had fifty to go, now; game, two hundred. And they played—and Monte won! With a yell of delight he made a grab for the stakes, but his countenance instantly came in contact with the muzzle of El Gamin's revolver.

"Hold!" El Gamin cried, sternly. "Those stakes are not yours. You have cheated! Look, gentlemen—a four deuce played upon the double-six, does not make fifteen. Nor can we call this a game; so we will play over!"

The crowd saw the mistake now, and Bill Monte saw that his attempt to cheat had been in vain. The dominoes were re-shuffled, and the game finished, El Gamin winning, just five ahead of his opponent.

Instantly upon laying down the game bone, he seized his revolver in time to cover Monte who was in the act of raising his.

"No fancy games!" the victor cried, grimly, raking in the stakes, and stowing them away in his pocket. "I won fairly!"

"You're a liar and a cheat!" Monte roared, with a frightful curse. "I'll give half o' my share ter ther man that'll shoot him dead, boys. Hurra!"

With an answering yell the herdsmen sprang forward toward the strange gambler expert. But, at the same time the Del Norteans made a rush upon them, and there in that Oriental Palace took place a bloody affray, which the men of Del Norte won, only because of superiority of numbers. And when the battle was over, and a dozen dead and dying lay stretched out upon the blood-stained floor, it was found that El Gamin was gone.

Bill Monte and his herdsmen, though thoroughly whipped, were none the less boastful and defiant, and held their own in the Palace. Ready were these rough cattle men to uphold their leader, with money or with fight, for a large percentage of them feared him, by right of a secret, which we shall develop in the progress of our story.

Bitter was the disappointment then, among them to find that El Gamin had escaped, for not only did they wish to avenge the death of their fallen comrades, but to re-establish Bill Monte in business again, and restore him his money.

Down the beautiful San Luis valley, about ten miles from Del Norte, and upon the banks of the Rio Grande, was a pretty little homestead, consisting of an ancient Mexican hacienda, built of adobes, and a number of out-buildings, all set down upon a prairie-

plot of green, which was guarded on three sides by a white picket fence, and sloped gently down to the water's edge.

Back from the building rolled mile after mile of gentle, undulating prairie, a large portion of it devoted to stock grazing, while here and there were patches of grain and corn, showing that agriculture was not neglected.

Upon these herding-plains, each man has his own individual tract, generally square in shape, with each corner marked off with a tall pole; and it means war to trespass upon those grounds belonging to another, even if only stepping across a line, unless you have a passageway bargained for.

Thus, in the San Luis valley, lanterns are hoisted upon the tops of these claim-marking poles, of various colors of light, presenting a strange appearance if seen upon a particularly dark night, or in a clear one.

Two men and a pack of well-trained Mexican shepherd dogs are all that is generally required to watch a herd, one change going on at noon and coming off at midnight, and *vice versa*. The dogs soon learn the limits allowed for grazing, and need few directions to keep the herds within their proper bounds.

The principal foes of the herders of the San Luis valley are the few strolling, wandering Indians who still haunt Southern Colorado, being for the most part vagabond Navajos.

The homestead we have described was handsomely located, in sight of Del Norte—indeed, there were no neighbors nearer, except one family further down the valley, the larger share of the herders living further inland.

And to this sequestered spot, by Rio Grande Del Norte's murmuring waters, Edward Harris had come, when in his *balloon* he had sailed away from Eureka, up in Idaho.

It is useless, perhaps, to tell the reader of this LIBRARY who Edward Harris is, for as Deadwood Dick he is now well known to many thousands of readers.

Deadwood Dick, the prince of road-agents, once; but now a reformed man, leading the honest life of cattle-herder.

Once when still a road-agent, he had come down into this valley, hearing of its great beauty and future wealth. He had seen this old Mexican hacienda with its accompanying six hundred acres, and purchased it for a song; and now with his loved and loving wife and boy, he had taken possession of it, leading a quiet life, with servants enough to do the work in the house and upon the stock lands; for Dick was annually receiving handsome profits from a gold mine in the Black Hills, and could afford to live luxuriously.

One pleasant sunny afternoon, a few days after the event last narrated, the happy little group were gathered under the trees upon the lawn in front of the hacienda, which sloped gently to the water's edge.

It was a beautiful day for December—just such a day as we have in our Eastern States in July or August, for Del Norte and the San Luis are almost in the tropics, it would seem. No winter ever assails them until January, if at all, and lasts but a couple of months. Overhead the sky was clear and blue, while the sun shone down scorchingly, its intense heat only relieved by the gentle breeze blowing over the prairies from the white-capped mountains in the hazy distance.

Trees were still green in company with the velvety grass, and the birds yet sung joyous songs among the foliage, while sweetly perfumed flowers, and towering cactuses adorned the lawn. Altogether the scene was charming and picturesque, with all the beauties of the land in rivalry with the stateliness of the Rio Grande as it moved murmuring by.

Deadwood Dick had thrown himself upon the lawn, while Leone sat in a huge bamboo chair in front of him, her gaze resting upon his handsome face and form lovingly.

Little Dick, but a few months old, was upon the grass, near by, crowing loudly as the birds sung, and kicking up his heels in babyish delight.

"And how like you the new home, darling?" young Harris asked, taking his cigarette from between his lips.

"Like it?" Leone repeated, glancing about her, half dreamily. "I like it more than I can tell, dear Eddie. I like it anywhere, where you are!"

"And home would be no home without you, my peerless. Here, in this beautiful home, if the world will leave me alone, I can end my days in peace and bliss with you, my darling; and hunger not for the old wild life."

"Ah! but how I fear this beautiful home will not long hold us both, Prince," the girl-wife replied, sadly. "Something seems to tell me that we are to again experience trouble—that we are going to be parted again, perhaps forever."

"Pooh! you have the blues a little over something that has not gone right. What is it, pet?" and he drew her down beside him on the soft carpet of grass.

"Nothing I know of yet, dear husband," she replied, nestling fondly in his arms. "But I got to thinking what if we should be separated, when we are so happy?"

"It would be a bitter blow, indeed, my peerless, but we will not think of such a thing. Here we have all that heart can desire, except neighbors, which are few and far between, and of rather an undesirable quality. I don't know about that family down the river, as I have not yet penetrated that far into the valley. And, Leone, I feel that we need apprehend no danger—not even discovery, from our enemies, for a long time to come. Emigration is not coming from the North, but from the East."

"Ah! Eddie, you know not what moment that Edith Stone may come, for she is your life-long enemy. Do you really believe that she is crazy, dear?"

Deadwood Dick nodded his head slowly, as he replied:

"I do, Leone—I can believe nothing else, for I do not think she was so evil of heart, before."

"Oh! but you cannot tell. She may have been, without your knowledge. Women always bear the best appearance on the outside, you know;" with a sly nudge. "Besides, there were both her uncle and cousin, of a villainous turn, which may have affected her."

"Possibly," Dick replied, gazing thoughtfully at the ground.

"And, dear, who is that strange female horseman I saw spurring over the plain, this morning, from my chamber window?"

"Eh? you saw her, then? Well, the herders call her the Prairie Patrol—Lestie, her name is. But I cannot make head nor tail out of it, I'll be dashed. Strange occupation for a young woman, to be roaming over the plains, without apparent object."

At this juncture there were footsteps heard, and a wiry little old man, accompanied by a billy-goat, of the ugliest of countenances, came striding up, from the prairie, rifle in hand.

He was clad in a hunting-suit of buckskin, with top-boots and herder's slouch hat; yet we have no difficulty in recognizing our friend of bygone days, Old Avalanche.

Both Dick and Leone smiled their welcome, as the veteran Annihilator approached, and caught little Master Dick up in his arms, and tossed him upon his shoulder, for a "hoss-back" ride, while Florence Nightingale rubbed jealously against his legs, and shook his sledge-hammer head, in evident displeasure that his master should take a new pet.

"Be still, Florence, ye dastard ornery old critter; behave yourself, afore I giv' ye ther condooceive end of my number eleven cowhide. Durnedest old beast is that goat, sir, thet evyer war death ter grass, I'm tellin' ye. Why, thar war ther time, up in Nevada, at Carson City, when I war tryin' ter court up the Widder Washington—one o' George's flock. That pesky goat wouldn't hev it, ertall, sir. He'd jest cum an' ram his ramifications ag'in' ther side o' ther house, ontel ye'd suppose an' earthquake hed rolled over. Great hysterical ham-bone! he got so mad one night when I war squeezein' kisses out o' ther widder, thet wi' a beller he cum tearin' right thru a windy, an' smashed things generally."

"Yes, a great goat that, and a great master, too," replied Dick, with an amused smile. "A well-matched team."

"Where have you been, to-day, uncle?" asked Leone, for that was what she and Dick often called the old scout, he seemed so near to them; "roaming on the plains, I suppose?"

"Yas, out a-tryin' my new 'oss, ma'am, but he ain't no seech anymole as my old Prudence Cordeliar war, I tell you. Prudence ked sling off a shoe an' hit a red nigger wi' the utmost sang froid ye ever see'd. By ther way, Dickey, boyee, here's a queer little message that ther gal they call the Prairie Patrol, sent ter ye thru yer 'umble servant;" and the old man after considerable fumbling in his pockets, produced an enveloped message, and handed it to Deadwood Dick.

"Hello! what does this mean?" the ex-Prince exclaimed, in surprise, as he tore the wrapper. "Leone, what do you suspect? See, it is directed to me—Deadwood Dick."

Leone grew white, instantly, for she believed that a terrible blow was impending.

The message read as follows:

"Deadwood Dick, you are in deadly danger. You need counsel, which I cannot give you on paper. Keep out of Del Norte; you have two hundred enemies there, and among the herders. Meet me down the river, at the ruined ranch, to-night, at moon-rise. —LESTIE, PRAIRIE PATROL!"

CHAPTER III.

THE SPECTACLE IN THE GLADE—"THE ARKANSAS. TOOTHPICK."

THAT night was beautiful in the extreme, in the picturesque mountains and on the grazing prairies of Southern Colorado, soft moonlight striking here and there upon little Spanish-American towns of adobe, or an occasional village of Navajoes, in some wild lonely spot.

Several miles up the San Luis valley from the home of the Harrises, was a large tract of timber extending from the river which rolled sullenly through the center of the valley, across a southern grazing prairie, finally connecting with the mountains, miles in the hazy distance. This timber seemed to form a sort of chain across the valley, and from its dark, gloomy appearance had taken the name of Black Woods. It was about a mile in width by twenty long, and after passing through it, the valley continued on toward its head, a mass of rolling prairie.

On the banks of the Rio Grande as it flowed through one end of this Black Woods, was a ruined hacienda of adobe, which to all appearance had not been tenanted for many years; probably not since the Spanish settlers first invaded this country of gold. It was in every sense of the word a ruined and ghostly old place.

It was high and irregularly built with many curious angles and branching wings; the adobes were crumbling away, and a matted mass of wild vines nearly hid from view the semblance of a habitation. The windows were burst out, the doors unhinged, and the ghostly ruins of a once grand homestead given over to the occupancy of such tenants of the animal kingdom as had no better habitation.

The forest entirely surrounded the hacienda, but in front of it was a small glade that had some time been a handsome place, for crumbling statuary and marble fountains yet gleamed from recesses in the massed foliage, and serpentine graveled walks led

down across it to the gurgling, waters of the Rio Grande, a few rods away.

And on this night the soaring full moon up in the dome of heaven, threw a ghastly flood of light down upon the ruins, and upon a tragic scene in the deserted glade. No—not deserted, for in its center stands a tree with outspreading branches, and to one of these a dark object is suspended by means of a stout rope.

As we approach nearer, we are able, by aid of the flood of weird moonlight, to define this spectacle, and make it out to be the body of a man, hung by the neck.

Surely the scene is in unison with the surroundings, for everything about the ruins reminds one of the dead and the dead past; and the river murmurs a weird requiem. The stillness is profound, until, when the moon reaches a point almost directly overhead, there are sounds of horse's feet heard close at hand, and half a dozen coyotes sneak out from the hacienda, and into the wood.

Then, after considerable noise, and a number of rather broad expressions of indignation, a horseman emerged suddenly into the glade.

Apparently astonished to find himself out of the timber tangle, he leaned back in the saddle and pulled with all his strength upon the reins, succeeding finally in bringing his steed, a very ugly-tempered and obstinate mule, to a halt.

"Whoa-r-r!" the stranger sung out, with a peculiar nasal twang, as he succeeded in fetching the beast to a standstill—"whoa-r-r, ye ungodly beast, while we take in a comprehensive view o' ther surroundings."

A strange pair were this stranger and his mule—as odd in appearance as one is often likely to meet on the Overland trail.

The man was a seven-footer if he was an inch in height, and as lank and gaunt as a prairie-wolf after a severe winter. Evidently there was not a spare pound of flesh about him, and if he had been accustomed to good living, it had in no way affected him as to corpulence. He was rather illy proportioned, too, for the longest portion of his person was his legs, his trunk or body being strangely dwarfed, and his neck long and crane-like. Upon this latter was perched a head almost twice the size of that of an ordinary mortal, covered with a straggling matted shock of sandy hair, that fell half-way down to his waist. His arms were equally long with his legs; and his face was covered to the eyes with a red shaggy beard, which almost touched his belt. His eyes were black and magnetic, and shaded by a broad-brim herder's hat, with the rim turned down; while his remaining habiliments consisted of a suit of corduroy, and top-boots. In his belt he carried both revolvers, knife and lasso, while a handsome rifle was slung at his back.

"A being strange,
Guess if you can
The mystery of
This 'toothpick' man."

A being strange, he was ludicrous, certainly, as he sat astride the mule, an animal of exceeding mulish aspect, and ugly countenance, and undersized, at that, to that extent which made it necessary for the rider to lock his long legs under the animal's belly, to keep them from dragging. A fact it was that he could sit in the saddle, and walk upon the ground, of such exceeding length were those thighs of his.

"Whoa-r-r!" repeated this strange individual, for the third time, though the mule was stationary for the time being—"whoa-r-r, consarn ye, an' let yer lord-an'-master make an observatory o' thes leetle place. Hullo! darn my old sow's last litter o' pigs! what in all creat'on aire thet hangin' ter yander limb—a man? Aire this a graveyard or seminary, ther great Toothpick o' Arkansas hes stumbled inter—a sort o' cryptogram whar anshent Aztecs hang up corpses ter dry. Holy sulphurous fires of anshent Jerusalem!"

Dropping the reins, the Arkansas Toothpick dropped his feet to terra firma, and walked straight ahead toward the grim spectacle in the moonlight, passing over the mule's head without any trouble.

At length he paused before the suspended body, and gazed at it speculatively.

"Humph!" was his next grim comment, as he engulfed a huge quid of tobacco, "et aire a sad sight ter parseeve a feller human in them distressed circumstances, I swar. Cotched ther throat disease, an' choked hisself inter angelicky. Wonder who he is—wether he is a Toothpick, a Jayhawker, or a Gopher? Trim-b'llt sort uv a coon; young an' and-sum, too. 'Spect I don't know no 'hin' about how he slid off, ner 'tain't none o' my bizness; yet I do like ter make my mark in ther world. Don't expect et would be no harm, nuther. Judith, ye old beast, cum hayr, wi' my writin' materials, w'lle I write thes poor cuss's obituary."

According to orders, the mule came forward, to the giant's side, but cast a suspicious eye at the corpse swinging in the breeze.

"Sho! ye needn't be skeart, old gal, at thet scare-crow!" the Toothpick assured, as he began to write upon some paper. "Ye've seen wuss funerals nor thet, in yer lifetime, I tell ye."

Busily wrote this uncouth man from Arkansas, and at length he finished and pinned the notice, which was penned upon half a sheet of foolscap paper, in large, sprawling letters, upon the clothing of the suspended corpse. Then he stepped back, with a grim chuckle, and contemplated his work with evident satisfaction.

"Tain't much stumps o' writin', thet ain't!" he remarked, addressing the drowsing mule, "but et's plain an' homely, jes' like ther biographer uv et. Warn't learnt much them days I went ter schule in Arkansas; played old sledge and seven up, most o' ther time. Guess we've done about ther extent o' our pile, Judith, so we might as well mog along."

Saying which the eccentric ranger spread his legs apart, and the sagacious animal aimed between them, and Toothpick sat down into the saddle without any ado.

"Now, g'lange, ye beast, an' none o' yer funny bizness, fer we're goin' ter reach Del Norte ter-night, or bu'st ther b'ler!"

And away trotted the little mule, with his ludicrous burden, across the glade.

Soon they were out of sight in the wood, and things in that lonely glade once more resumed their ghostly appearance. The moon still showered down its whitish, spectral light, a rising breeze moaned through the Black Woods, an owl hooted within the ruined hacienda, and the river moved by, with its sullen, monotonous murmur.

With the departure of the midnight traveler, the coyotes sneaked back to their haunts in the ruins, and howled their disgust upon the night.

But what was this message the strange individual had left upon the body of the unlucky young man, whoever he might be, who had been lynched in the glade?

The paper was lit up by the light of the weird moon, and revealed the following words, written in rude scrawls:

"Jem Surrat Murry, Eskwire, ther 'original' Toothpick frum Arkansas, desires ter announce thet he found this corpus hangin' ter a limb, an' rendered a coroner's verdict o' died o' a tightness in ther weazand. Take warning, ye sinners, for et ther original Toothpick frum Arkansas ev'er gits a clutch at ye, ye're bound ter shake hands wi' a devil. —Yours trooly, JEM MURRAY."

The wagon train containing the colonizationists, had camped just out of Del Norte, on the western side of the town and upon the river bank.

The caravan was a large one, containing in all a hundred "schooners," drawn by oxen, a large stud of horses, and about sixty families, mostly from Pennsylvania and New York.

Among this strong band the males and the females were about evenly divided, a portion of each being of a marriageable age, while the remainder were the possessors of families. Naturally there was a great rivalry among the young men, which, during the long journey of the caravan, had in more than one instance led into a quarrel and fight, though the latter was generally secretly conducted.

On the day that the caravan camped without the town, those belonging to it were visited by a number of curious Del Norteans, and not a few decoys were offered to induce the young men and maidens into the town, and to that end of wholesale and retail robbery by cards, the Oriental.

But there were two of the young men who did not go.

They refused all solicitations, and after dark that evening, met upon the prairie, outside of the town.

Both were handsome young fellows of two-and-twenty years, well-built and physically developed, and their names were respectively Redwood and Arlington. Fred Arlington was the better tempered of the two, and a more general favorite. His parents were wealthy, and he had traveled in the West before—it was he, in fact, who had located the new colony which the caravan were about to start. Dean Redwood was a good fellow in his way, but one of those whom you have to get thoroughly used to, ere you can say that you like them.

He was a native of Montana, he stated; had joined the train only a few days' travel beyond Del Norte, with the expressed intention of making one of the colony.

And these two young men now met upon the dark prairie, and confronted each other, with savage looks and drawn revolvers.

"At last we are alone, Dean Redwood!" young Arlington cried in a stern ringing voice, that betrayed how intense was his bitterness and hatred—"alone and safely out of hearing, where no one will interfere."

"I believe so," Redwood assented, with a nod and a glance about. "Your invitation out here was at first a matter of surprise, but after due reflection, I concluded it was caused by your jealousy toward me for having a few words to say to your affianced, Miss Ada Belldon."

"That for one reason, you dog. You have instilled poison into her mind, or infatuated her, the devil only knows which. Do not think I do not recognize you, sir, for I do. We have met before."

"Yes, we have met before," Redwood replied, grimly, "and the recollections I have of you, are none too pleasing, I assure you. When I think of the loving girl you enticed from me, and betrayed to death, I felt like catching you by the throat and choking the life out of you."

"No doubt you joined the train for some such a purpose!" sneered Arlington.

"No matter about my object in joining the caravan," replied Redwood. "I saw the lovely girl you were trying to entrap, as you would have entrapped poor Lena Alden, had not death first interfered. And, now, sir, I confess, I warned her of your past history, and to look out for you as she would for snakes."

"Yes, I know you did, and by so doing, made it necessary for me to call this interesting meeting."

"What do you want?"

"Your life—and you want mine!"

"No, I have no desire in that direction. The great hereafter will be time enough to avenge Lena Alden's wrongs. I do not want your life."

"But, I want yours, and will have it, or die as I would have you die."

"Very well. If you will risk your life in trying to kill me, your fate be upon your own head. Shall it be revolvers?"

"Yes; as well end the work with them as any other weapons!"

Then there in the first light of the moon that was showing her forehead over the horizon, the two foes measured off a proper distance, and took their places.

"We will count in concert, and fire at the word three. Are you ready?" from Redwood.

"Perfectly!" Arlington replied, as with a trembling hand he raised a revolver on a line with his face, which was deathly pale.

"All right then—one!"

In which Arlington joined.

"Two!" from both, in sternly ringing voices.

Then came—"Three! Fire!"

CHAPTER IV. THE PRAIRIE PATROL.

GREAT was the surprise of Deadwood Dick, at the contents of the strange message Old Avalanche had brought him, coming as it did from the mysterious Patrol of the Prairies. And he had company in his wonderment, for the great Annihilator and Leone shared it with him.

"What can it mean? Who does it signify—this word, enemies? Can it be that my old foes from Deadwood have trailed me, even here?" the young ex-road agent said, gazing thoughtfully at the paper. "Or is this some trap to decoy me to death? By heaven! I'd give a deal to have this riddle solved. What kind of a looking female, Alva?"

"Great ham-bone that paralyzed old Joner wif' electricity! I hain't ther least fjeer, Dickey, my b'ye. See'd her, ter be sure, but she war about forty yards off, an' a-sallin' along like a veritable thunderstorm o' demolition, an' afore I got ready ter screw my vision onto her, she war sumwhers else. Beaulifully shaped, however, an' et's likely thet she's ther persessor of a scientific p'sygnomy!"

"What! you were not nearer than forty yards to her, an yet you say she sent this message with you?" "Zebulon Zack, yes!" and the old man laid back upon the grass, and for the space of several minutes was convulsed with laughter.

"So she did, but ye orter see'd her. She tuk a bow an' arrier from her belt, an' takin' aim, sir, fer an actooal fact, w'out breakin' ther corner off'm ther ten commandments, she stuck ther arrier plum inter ther tail o' Anna Dickinson, my new 'oss. Moses in ther scriptural bull-rushes! ye orter seen thet poor anamile, then, Dickey—ye jest orter see'd her! Ham-bone from ther w'ale thet old Joner stowed away! she jest give a yell like a bloodthirsty Comanche, or a Settin' Bull, an' fainted clean away—fact, by gracious. An' I found thet yere message tied ter ther tale o' ther arrier. Zebulon Zackariaher! ef thet hed been old Prudence Cordeliar, now, she wouldn't 'a fainted—oh! no. She'd jest slung a cast iron hoss-shoe at that Prairie Gadder, in most scientific fashion. See'd her sham-poo the sculp of a noble red devil up in Montana, once, en thet manner. But, I'm tellin' ye thar's heaps o' virtue an' l'arin' about Anna Dickinson, barrin' ther fac' thet Prudence Cordeliar war ther likeliest beast thet ever figgered in ther historical evolutions o' ther great Annihilation—ther great boreal disease o' these sequestered northern longtoads and lattytudes, ef we want ter know it."

"Anna kin brush a fly off'm her left ear wif' her right 'un, in astonishin' style, an' when ye cum ter pacin' wif' a mad Texan steer, w'at's got astray from ther herd, she's thar, bet yer pile on that."

"Oh! Dick!" Leone exclaimed, "I fear that, as I said, our home is to be broken up—that we are to be separated. Don't go to meet this strange woman, whose designs you know not!"

"Ah! my dear, but I must go. If I were to let this warning go unheeded, it might be the means of the death of all of us. No! I shall go, but well prepared to let Greek meet Greek. Avalanche, will you order my horse, please?"

"Yes, Dickey, b'ye. But let me advise y'er take this great boreal disease along wif' ye. Thar's heaps o' fun in ther Annihilation, ef thar is but two remaining members; an' ef thar's plenty o' Injun ter inoculate ther great devastatin' disease inter—"

"No, scout, you had best remain here, and guard Leone and my boy, for there is no foretelling what may happen, at any moment. We are alone and in a land of strangers, and undesirable ones, too, for these Spanish-Mexican cattle-herders are but a band of border-ruffians—men who'd as soon fight as eat!"

"All right, b'ye; I'll stay and do guard duty, an' ef enny thing happens, you can caly late that Avalanche didn't go down w'out fightin' fer your darlin'!" and then the Annihilator turned away, wiping a suspicious moisture out of the corner of his eyes. For he loved the Harrises, did that grim old veteran, whose life had been given up to border-battle—they were nearer to his rough but kind old heart than others had ever been, and he felt he could willingly shed his last drop of blood in their cause.

After he had gone, Deadwood Dick arose, and paced moodily to and fro across the lawn, his brows knitted, and a sigh occasionally escaped his lips; while, with Master Dick in her arms, Leone sat upon the grass, watching her handsome prince, with proud, tearful gaze.

Deadwood Dick was half undecided what to do. He had some doubts as to this strange woman, Prairie Patrol; suspicions that all might not be meant well for him would force themselves upon him. Yet she might be a friend, and by some way have learned of danger that was threatening him, and wished to apprise him of it.

These were the two phases of the matter, he contemplated.

At last he turned to Leone, none of the moody expression gone from his brow.

"Cheer up, little woman, and trust in Avalanche to protect you while I am gone. He will do it as well as I could, if not better. The ride is but six miles, and I may not be gone over three hours. Adieu, now!"

He bent over and kissed her and the babe repeatedly; then vaulted upon the back of a handsome black horse which a peon had brought, and was dashing away, waving his hat back in farewell parting.

The sun was just sinking upon the edge of the horizon, and he knew it would be close on to night ere he reached the ruined ranch, so he urged his steed into a gallop, and dashed on over the prairie, keeping near to the river shore.

A splendid rider he was; road-agent life in the Black Hills had perfected him in the art of equestrianism, if it can be justly termed an art, and he sat the saddle with a grace rarely equaled. Not stiff, but in a swinging, easy motion peculiar to the horseman of the western prairies. An Eastern equestrian will, on first seeing their Western brothers ride, be considerably amused, no doubt, at the motions in saddle; but, put the West against the world for wild, reckless and graceful riding.

Deadwood Dick pushed steadily on, not allowing his well-bottomed animal to leave a gallop for the first three miles of the journey. Then, as he perceived that he could make the Black Woods ere night fell, he drew rein to a walk, and allowed his noble steed to profit by the cool breeze that was waiting over the billowy prairie.

The sun had half sunk out of sight below a horizon of green and yellow; the last rays of gold were shooting over the beautiful landscape, and as Deadwood Dick glanced around him, a glow of enthusiasm swept over his features.

"'Tis grand!" he mused—"grand beyond even my appreciation of the beautiful. Such a noble location for comfortable homes; how happy I and Leone might be, here, if my foes would only keep away! Ah! curse them; I believe they intend to hunt me down to death. But, ere long patience and endurance will cease to be a virtue, and I shall be driven back into that old, wild life—the past which has so bitter a sting. But surely a great Master will not allow that; he will avert the necessity of retrogression, and—and—"

Here he fell off into a fit of musing, and for some time, apparently, was unconscious of all that was going on around him.

But then he aroused, and urged his horse on faster.

Night's somber shadows were thickening rapidly, when he came into the immediate neighborhood of the wood. Only for the moon that was rising out of an eastern prairie billow, the darkness would have been intense. As he neared the forest, Deadwood Dick drew his revolvers from their holsters, and placed fresh cartridges in the cylinders, and turned his knife to a handy position, for he knew not how soon he might have occasion to use one or both.

Then he urged his horse forward to the edge of the wood, and dismounted. Securing the animal so that he could not wander away, he stepped stealthily into the timber, and made his way toward the ruined hacienda—not boldly, but cautiously, with all his senses upon the alert for danger.

He meant to prevent a surprise, if possible. Every few steps he paused to listen, and peered sharply around him, at every object which he thought might dissolve into a human form.

The spectral moonlight sifting down through the tree-tops cast strange shadows, and the young man was several times fooled in believing these to be ambushed enemies.

At last, after full half an hour of stealthy prowling, he reached the glade in front of the hacienda, and paused on the edge.

Before him was the old ruin, looking weird and ghostly; but that ghostly sight which the Arkansas Toothpick had seen, later in that same night, was not suspended from the limb of the tree.

Deadwood Dick did not go boldly into the glade. It was not because he lacked the courage to do so, but because he preferred to remain under cover, and watch what transpired.

And after an hour of watching, without reward, he was put in the way of making a discovery.

There came the tramp of a horse's feet, and the mysterious female Patrol of the Prairies rode into the glade, upon the back of a powerful black steed, a near mate to the one Deadwood Dick had left out on the edge of the wood and prairie. In her arms, and partly resting across her saddle-bow, the Patrol carried a heavy burden.

This Deadwood Dick had no difficulty in making out as a man's body, and a natural curiosity possessed him to know the meaning of these strange movements of this strange woman. That she was beautiful he could easily perceive, for the moonlight shone full in her face, as she drew rein—in a face of remarkably perfect cast, each feature being regularly chiseled as though by the artist's hand. The eyes were large and wild in expression, and hair of the hue of the unburred chestnut swept over her shoulders. Elegantly contoured and graceful in a form of medium height, she looked very pretty, with the silvery moonlight shedding a soft radiance over her.

She was attired in a gown of some brownish stuff, while a veil was made to answer the purpose of a covering upon her head.

"By Jove!" Deadwood Dick commented, thoughtfully, from his retreat, "she is at least a handsome woman, and there is mystery about her. I wonder who is that man she carries, and what the row is, generally?"

His questions were soon answered.

The Prairie Patrol drew rein in under the tree, where, late, hung the corpse, and glanced around her, cautiously.

"I am alone," she said, in a tone loud enough that her words were audible to the watcher in the edge of the glade. "El Gamin did not fall into t'ie trap I laid for him, because he is a coward. He recognized my writing, no doubt, and like a shy fox, he has kept within his hole. But, it will not avail him. Bill Monte and the Prairie League owe him a grudge, and Wild Leslie will be revenged through them, who kneel at her shrine, as heathen worship before their golden idols!"

Thus fiercely spoke the beautiful Patrol; then with a start she fixed her gaze upon the face of the man she had carried in her arms.

"Ha! why should I complain? I have one of those who put the blight upon my life, and though another killed him, I have his body. Fred Arlington, even though you are dead—dead and cold, never more to return to life—I hate you, I hate you! Truly Dean Redwood sent the bullet through his brain, and I would love him for it, but that I have another work to perform. El Gamin has dared to come back, but he shall not escape the avenging hand of Wild Leslie—ha! ha! no; he and his wife and child shall die!"

In his hiding, Deadwood Dick started violently, as the latter part of her speech was heard, and a sudden faintness assailed him.

"My God!" he gasped, as a sudden thought flashed across his brain. "Can it be that it is I whom she mistakes for this El Gamin? By heaven! I believe I have solved the mystery. She has decoyed me here, to murder me, and while I am here, this Bill Monte and the 'Prairie League' of whom she speaks, are attacking my home and slaughtering my wife and child!"

An awful horror seized upon the ex-road-agent, and for the space of several moments, he was too appalled to move or speak.

But in the meantime the strange woman, Prairie Patrol, was speaking:

"Yes, they shall all die, curse them, to avenge the ruined life of Wild Leslie. El Gamin dead, there are but two more to follow ere the record of vengeance is complete. Ha! ha! Fred Arlington, you, the basest villain of the lot, dead first, but not by my hand. Dean Redwood should have died just the same as you, but he was spared. He must follow, also. Ha! I will lynch Fred Arlington even tho' he is no longer of the living and cannot feel the torture."

Her resolve was apparent.

She held the body evenly balanced across the horse's neck, and then uncoupled a long lasso from about the saddle-bow. One end she dextrously formed into a slipping noose, and shirred about the neck of the corpse; then she tossed the other over the nearest limb above her.

It went over and came down, and then with a display of considerable strength, she drew the dead colonist up into mid-air, and fastened the rope about his arm-pits, so that he was securely hung.

"Ha! ha! there you are, Fred Arlington, an illustration of the just end of such as follow in your footsteps, through life. You are the first to head the list of Leslie's vengeance, but by no means the last!"

Then, upon sudden impulse, apparently, she plunged the spurs into her animal's flanks, and dashed out of the glade.

But Deadwood Dick had preceded her, and mounted upon his own fleet steed, was dashing over the prairies at a mad rate of speed.

For an unnatural glow reflected against the eastern sky told him that there was need of him at the ranch—that trouble was occurring there!

CHAPTER V. A NIGHT OF DEATH.

AFTER the departure of Deadwood Dick, Old Avalanche joined Leone Harris upon the lawn, where she still sat, weeping softly over her babe.

"Cheer up, my little ledly!" the grim veteran said, comfortingly, "for thar's allus a calm after er squall, they say. Great ham-bone thet dislocated ther jaw of old Joner! w'at ye cryin' at anyhow? Cryin' are a bad habit, I've hear tell. It dries up one's blood, and wharever a tear o' salt brine falls onto a blade o' grass, that eyedentical blade ar devastated as ef by a contagious disease. Knew a galloon onc't, pritty as a picter, who cried her eyes out and had ter goit blind ther rest of her nateral days, fer weepin' after a lost set o' false teeth—like ther man thet bought a case o' chip hats; thort her wasn't any more ever goin' ter be made."

"Oh! you are kind, sir, in your attempts to cheer, but I cannot help weeping, for I have a premonition of danger; an awful fear assails me, that peril greater than we suspect, surrounds us. Oh! Dick! why did you go? We shall never meet again!"

"Tut! tut!" poohed the Annihilator, but with less joviality than before, for somehow he had become possessed of this strange foreboding—"tut! tut! child; don't cry ernuther bit. I'll warrant Dickey'll cum back. He's not ther boy ter desert a friend long, when it is possible to help it. Cum inter ther house, ma'am, and in thar ye won't feel so lonesome, I'll bet; eh! junior Dick?" And the Annihilator caught the cowering infant in his arms, and bounded gayly away toward the hacienda.

Leone arose to her feet, with a sigh, and followed in their wake. She had resolved to hope for the best, though she could but feel that Dick had gone into danger—perhaps death.

She went within the hacienda, which was furnished after a fastidious Spanish taste, and betook herself to the parlor overlooking the great prairies, where the sounds of boisterous laughter announced that Avalanche and master Dick had preceded her.

She found the old scout trotting the child upon his knee, and singing, laughing and whistling, alternate-

ly, to it, like some great overgrown schoolboy. He seemed to have found a new realization of life and comfort, in caring for and amusing the babe of his friend. Perhaps it was because a ripe old age was fast nearing him toward his second childhood.

But, brave old veteran, whose heart was as pure as crystal, though hidden under a rough uncouth covering, he'll have to die—as we all shall have to contribute our mite toward paying off the great eternal debt. But when dies one from our midst, whose goodness to his friends and devotion to his country have been a sole object in his life, we mourn that loss, even though we be but strangers.

And little did the Annihilator or Leone dream of the near approach of death, as he played with Leone's child—Deadwood Dick; both of whom he regarded as his grandchildren, and loved accordingly.

Little either of them thought of danger as such a close neighbor, until it came.

Leone first discovered it—a glowing red light out upon the prairie, too low for one of the poled-claim landmarks, and yet a light shining with such brilliancy as to reflect against the moonlit sky, apparently growing steadily in size.

She called the Annihilator's attention to it, with a startled scream.

"Look! look! see yonder light upon the prairie? What does it mean? Oh! heaven, can it mean that our enemies have—"

She paused and watched the face of the old scout for her answer.

He stood just without the window, and gazed fixedly at the light, his eyes reaching forth with nearly as much strength as in their youth.

At first the expression upon his face was indifferent, but it gradually became so grim, that she was forced to arouse him, so frightened she grew.

"Oh! tell me—tell me; is it danger?"

"Slathers an' haydoogins of it! My gal, ef I ain't mistaken, that's devilry afoot, and I'll bet my old hat on it. Ther perarie aire *afire*, off yonder, in a holler, an' ye ken't see it so good; but wait till she boils over ther hill, an' ye'll observe how she'll come a-whoopin' toward us!"

"Oh! merciful heaven! is this true? Oh! what shall we do? Let's flee, while the fire is yet at a distance!" Leone cried, clasping Dickie to her breast.

"Yes, I opine et would be a good idee, unless ther devil's imps, whoever they aire, hev surrounded ther ranch, in w'ich case we'll hev ter fight like a Spanish bull. You take the kid and go down to ther river bank, while I hunt up thet old flat-boat and launch it. Ef we can't get out o' thes deeficulty, I'm hanged if et won't be quare!"

The light upon the prairie was reflecting larger and larger against the starlit sky, casting the illumination of the moon in a shade. A brisk breeze was blowing in toward the hacienda from the mountain, and as soon as the fire crept up out of the billow, it had a smooth dry plain of two miles extent to the farm-house.

This distance the mad flames could soon ply over, and then the outbuildings around the hacienda would fall a prey to the fire.

Leone, in accordance with Avalanche's orders, hurried at once down across the lawn to the banks of the Rio Grande, only pausing for a few wraps as she passed through the house.

But it was a fatal action on her part!

In the meantime, Avalanche left the hacienda by a rear door, and strode toward the commodious barn, against one end of which leaned a large flatboat, evidently long gone into disuse, although it was still stanch and stout.

It had occurred to the old man upon instant thought, that this was the very thing they must use if they hoped to make their escape.

The river was wide and deep enough for the navigation of so shallow a boat, and they could on the swift current reach Del Norte much quicker than by horse, and stand less chance of discovery by their unknown enemies.

Tearing aside the vines that had grown upon the boat, he was about to attempt to drag it toward the river, when he heard a shout, and saw three men rush around the corner of the barn, with drawn pistols.

"Thar the old badger is; shoot him down!" yelled one, firing even as he spoke, and before the Annihilator could draw a weapon. The bullet took effect in the old man's chest, and he dropped upon one knee with a pitiful moan. He knew by the sensation of that wound, and the blood that spurted from it, that his hours on earth must be numbered, with a leaden mark.

But, hero to the verge of death, as he was, he was not vanquished, but drew a revolver in either hand, and waved them in defiance over his head, a wild triumphant expression upon his grim, stubby, sun-burnt face. Had the old hero caught a glimpse of the great future?

Who can tell?

"Keep off!" he yelled, and then his revolvers cracked spitefully, and two of the border ruffians went down. But the next instant a band of half a score swarmed around from behind the barn, and upon them did the brave old scout fire, until his last cartridge was gone, and a fifth bullet in his body caused him to drop back, in exhaustion and insensibility. Poor fellow! His days of usefulness—were they over?

Ah! that was a ride for life with Deadwood Dick, after he left the Black Woods, and saw the reflection of fire lighting up the eastern sky. He did not stop to ask of himself the meaning, now; he knew full well it meant danger and perhaps death—death to his loved ones; for had not Prairie Patrol in her strange soliloquy stated that Bill Monte and the Prairie League would descend upon the ranch, and destroy those whom they supposed to be

the loved ones of El Gamin, the gambler, against whom they held a deadly grudge?

On—on Deadwood Dick urged his animal, at the top of its speed—on—on, over prairie hill and prairie valley, sparing neither spur nor lash!

He bent forward in the saddle, his eyes riveted upon the course ahead of him, and upon the flames that were now leaping heavenward, and sweeping fiercely toward his prairie home. The whole plain was now as light as day; the heavens reflected a lurid light, and great mountain-clouds of black smoke and cinders swept through the air. A terrible horror assailed the flying horseman, as, when he was yet three miles away, he saw the awful fiery spectacle engulf his pretty home—saw the barn and outbuildings ignite and add to the conflagration. The hacienda was outwardly imperishable, being built of well-laid adobes.

Were Leone, Avalanche and his babe in this awful hell of fire—or had they escaped? This was the torturing question, and it fairly maddened him when he remembered Leone's entreaties for him to remain—maddened him, when his thoughts centered upon the mysterious Prairie Patrol, and her infernal decoy.

On—on—on flew the black steed whose fleetness of foot aroused the ex-road-agent's enthusiasm, even under the circumstances of the trying hour, for every leap took him half a length nearer.

On—on, closer and closer the wild horseman draws to the track of the flames, then he jerks his steed back upon its haunches, suddenly, as an apparition rises out of the grass, just ahead of him—a wild-looking, hatless man, with blood-besmeared garb.

"Great God! is that you, Avalanche, old boy?" burst from Deadwood Dick's lips; but the next instant the figure staggered—fell—went down in the grass again, out of sight.

With an exclamation, and a misgiving in his heart, Harris threw himself off his horse, and ran forward.

He found the old Annihilator stretched upon the ground, just where he had fallen, with very little of life in him. In some unaccountable way the brave old hero had crawled out of the track of the fire, in time to escape a fiery death.

Deadwood Dick knelt by his side, and clasped one of the veteran's horny old palms in his own.

"My God, Avalanche, this is awful!" he gasped, as he noted by the aid of the light of the fire the awful grayish pallor that was stealing over the old man's features. "Are you very badly wounded, dear friend?"

A faint smile played about the old scout's mouth, for a moment; then he slowly opened his eyes.

"Yes, I'm done for sure, Dickey, b'ye, an' no mistake," was the faint reply. "They cum onter me too fast, an' I couldn't play a trump every time, ag'in' ther deal. They put five bullets inter me, an' I'm gittin' too old ter stan' more'n three at one time, ye kno'. Guess thes aire ther Annihilation's last trail tergether, until ther great eternal 'un. Somehow, I've had a notion ever sence we cum from ther nor', theret these unonhealty lattitudes an' longy-toads fer me; an' then, bu'stin' ther great Annihilation, in leavin' Prudence up at Eureka kinder seemed ter wear onter me, fer we'd bin friends so long, an' et appeared like one o' us hed made a vacancy, by death. Nor, I don't think I'd a come, Dickey, b'ye, only that I c'u'dn't b'ar ter leave thet little baby o' yourn. It seemed ter hev a holt onter me, by its innocence and purity w'at couldn't be broke. Poor little boy; God took the old man, and the babe too, to keep him company!"

"What! Merciful God! do not tell me my child is dead!" Deadwood Dick cried, reeling back, blinded by tears which had come as he watched the old hero fast sinking away.

"Yes, b'ye; it's hard, I kno', but et's better'n ef he war to grow up an' sin. He'll be a little angel. I hope I'm going ter see him ag'in, Dickey; I don't think God will refuse me admission ter his kingdom, although I hev been a pretty rough customer, an' give ther everlastin' send-off ter heaps o' red-skins, an' them as warn't fit ter peopleize thes beautiful earth!"

"Have no fears, old friend, but die with faith in Jesus!" was young Harris's hoarse reply. "But, tell me of my wife and child, I pray, ere it is too late, Alva!"

"Ye-s!" the old martyr replied, dreamily, rubbing the clammy sweat from his forehead. "I'll try, tho' thar ain't much wind left in me, any more! Ther baby is dead. I fainted, after the heathen herders shot me, but cum to jest as ther fire war cummin' cluss. My thoughts instantly went ter Leone an' yer boy, an' I staggered aroun' ther house ter ther lawn. I found 'em both—ther babe dead, an' Leone frightfully wounded—lyin' on ther river bank. She prayed me ter take the babe and fetch it out o' ther track o' ther fire, an' then ef I c'u'd do et, ter cum back fer her. I fetched ther leetle angel, Dick, but, God forgive me, I hadn't ther strength ter go back fer yer wife!"

Here the old man broke down both with grief and exhaustion, and tears coursed down his furrowed cheeks; while Deadwood Dick with bowed head, wept as men seldom weep—wept with a heart full of bitterness and anguish—agony such as only the loss of loved ones by death can be felt.

Presently the Annihilator summoned all his strength and spoke again, though his words were gasped and hardly audible:

"She had water for a choice frum the flames, b'ye; 'twas a better death, at least. You'll find yer little angel boy lyin' in the grass, yonder, where I laid him to rest. Good-by, Dickey, don't grieve but trust in Jesus and—avenge us! God will help you do it. Can ye pray, boyee?"

With tears streaming down from his eyes, and grasping both the dying hero's hands in his, Deadwood Dick raised his face to the lurid fire-lit heaven

above, and prayed with all his soul and voice—prayed for those loved ones who were dead and dying, and for life, strength and help to avenge their fates. An earnest, eloquent prayer, touching and pitifully sweet, in memory of the dead. When he finished, and gazed at the old man, life's last pulses were just ebbing out!

CHAPTER VI.

HAWK HARRINGTON'S RIDE.—OMAHA OLL.

BACK to Del Norte's city of gambling we will go, some two weeks after the events last narrated, and witness a scene among strange characters, who are to take an active part in our story.

The home of the Harringtons was situated on the eastern side of Del Norte and upon the bank of the river, near where it debouches from the San Luis valley and rushes due southward.

The Harringtons were an Eastern family, natives of New Hampshire, who had come into this country among the earliest of the settlers, and took up land then belonging the Government, upon which they had settled, and now had, in addition to an excellent herding-ranch, a well-tilled farm, and a beautiful home, in the grim old Spanish hacienda, rambling and odd-shaped, which had stood by the river side, ere they came.

There were five of the family, two sons, one daughter, and the parents, both hard-working, honest people, of mature age.

The daughter, Ella, was a young lady of nineteen, very pretty, as the word goes, with a face in which purity and goodness shone, and a form that was pleasingly modeled.

She was the pride of her parents, and esteemed by all who knew her.

Of the two sons, one was christened Hawk and the other Philip. The former received his name for his sharpness of glance, when yet but a boy.

He was now a man of seven-and-twenty years, strong and stalwart, with a thorough knowledge of the prairie and herding, and all the matters appertaining thereto; was a great favorite among the rough herders, and was rather the "boss" of the family.

He was rough and sometimes brutal—had no respect for cloth, as the word goes, and was little at home.

Somehow, he had but few friends among the few intelligent and refined people of Del Norte and its surroundings. It had been whispered that he was not all as good as he might be, but whether there was any truth in this rumor, we shall soon endeavor to show.

Philip was a decided opposite of his brother, in nearly every particular.

He was more slight of build, and less rough and unfeeling, and his temperament was mild and affable.

He was universally admired, for he was as brave as a lion, and was one who would not screen the guilty, even though guilt existed in his own family. He believed in the word "justice," and in seeing justice enforced, under all circumstances.

He, with his father, tilled the farm, as a general thing, while Hawk was away looking after the herds upon the prairie.

One evening toward the middle of December, when a cold, raw north wind was blowing in across the plain, Hawk Harrington came riding mady in toward the hacienda, upon the back of his spirited charger, which was flecked with foam, results of a long, hard ride. There was a savage, desperate expression upon the face of the rider—a face that was dark and cruel, with fierce black eyes, hair, and heavy sweeping mustache—an expression of rage and of defiance, as occasionally he would glance over his shoulder at a group of a dozen horsemen that were hugging close in his rear. Masked, and graceful riders were these men, and mounted upon well-bottomed steeds, as was evidenced by the fact that they kept about the same distance from the fugitive, whose horse was reputed the fastest in the valley, without gaining or losing.

Young Harrington was wounded in half a dozen places, and blood spurted from these wounds at every jolt; but he was a man of indomitable will and rugged constitution, which was all that kept him in the saddle.

"Curses on the hounds of Satan!" he raved, as he plunged the cruel Spanish spurs deeper into the flanks of his nobly-striving animal. "On, Rocket, on, or we are lost! another bullet like those last two will drop me, if put in the same neighborhood. Furies take the accursed gang, who can they be?"

On! dashed the handsome brown racer over the yielding turf, and on came the pursuers, with equal speed, occasionally giving a yell of command, which, though the words were inaudible, Hawk knew were orders for him to halt.

But this he would not have done, had death confronted him on every side, and reckless was he of spirit. He would rather be shot from the flying chase, he had often said, than to be taken a prisoner.

On—on! the hacienda was yet a mile away; he could see its glimmering lights in the early evening—knew that there were strong hands and willing hearts within the grim adobe walls of the old home, that would gladly sally forth to fight for him, could he but give them warning.

Bang! crack! came the report of two rifles, and a bullet whizzed by each side of his head.

"Ha! ha!" the fugitive cried, with a shout of defiance; "that kind of news from the returning board is the style that suits me. How I would like to return my compliments, but the devils cut me off ere I could to horse and reach my weapons. On—on—on, Rocket!"

It seemed as though the noble steed was doing the very utmost within his power, but every yell of the

herder seemed to urge him to greater efforts. And on they went through the raw chill night—the first foreshadow of coming winter in this land of beauty—on, on, every leap bringing the fugitive nearer to safety.

Ping! again a rifle cracked, and a flash lit up the gathering gloom, while a bullet sped on its deadly mission. It hit the flying fugitive, and he was forced to hang to the pommel of his Mexican saddle to keep from being shook off.

A yell of triumph again rung out from the pursuers.

On—on—on! the last mile shortened rapidly, and with a great leap the noble steed of Hawk Harrington sprang over the five feet stone wall that encircled the hacienda, and fell dead, when the goal was reached.

For the pursuers had come to a halt after observing the leap of the gallant steed, and after a short consultation among themselves, turned back in the direction whence they had come, and galloped leisurely away.

Evidently they had concluded that the danger of besieging the hacienda was too great for them to incur, with so small a force.

Hawk Harrington had escaped death at the hands of these strange prairie rovers, but little more could be said. He was well pierced with bullets, and only a man of his strong constitution could ever have passed through the ordeal and lived.

But the care of an affectionate mother and sister; and a proper course of nursing soon brought him around, and though sore and lamed, he was in the saddle again in two days.

But of his pursuit, and the cause thereof, he was reticent. Perhaps he did not know the cause; perhaps he had only a suspicion of it; anyhow, he would not converse on the subject; would simply utter a curse and turn away when allusion was made to his wild ride for life.

On the following evening, we lead the gentle reader once more into that notorious den of gambling, the Oriental Palace, of Del Norte.

The place was well-filled as usual, with the 'ites' of Del Norte, and a few strangers from a colonization caravan that had stopped at the outskirts for the night.

In consequence of the coolness of the evening, the bands occupied the floor instead of the great balconies, overhead, and wild strains of delightful music were wafted through the immense auditorium.

Gay ladies and polished villains were here; rough bullying herders from the plains, and occasionally a miner or hunter from the Rockies or the plains; a strange collection as viewed under the light of the mighty chandeliers.

Bill Monte presided at the *cloire* table, as usual, and the faro, and keno games were in full blast. New sports had recently been added to the attractions at the Oriental, such as lifting matches for prizes, and jumping, boxing, and target shooting; and the Wheel of Fortune man had also found a stall in the great palace wherein to let the man of money risk his all, and stand a chance of winning—or losing.

Around this game, if a game it can be justly called, which possesses its peculiar fascination, as well as other games, were collected a large group of men, some strangers, a few habitués of the Palace, and a share made up of herdsmen from the valley.

There were twelve cards, with four numbers on each beginning at one, and running up as high as 48; each card retailed at five dollars, with fifty dollars in the pool, which left ten dollars to the manager of the enterprise at each whirl of the wheel, and fifty dollars to the lucky holder of the card whose number wins.

Of course the banker is constantly in pocket, and in good humor, which invariably reflects largely upon the crowd.

The game-wheel had been revolving steadily for an hour, with ready sale for the cards, and a young man lounging against the railing had been watching it, narrowly, without venturing anything.

He was of medium height of western men, straight and iron-cast in every limb, with broad shoulders, and depth of chest; and was attired in a well-fitting suit of black cloth, with top boots and slouch *sombrero*. In a belt at his waist he carried revolvers, knife and lasso, and a full mask screened his face from view.

"Another sale, gentlemen; here's your chance to acquire a chance, and here's where you chance upon fortunes, by luck. Who'll have this card, whose numbers are 13, 14, 15, and 16? Who'll have it? Sure to be the winning card. No cheating in this game, gentlemen; all's fair and honestly conducted. You can see for yourself where the wheel stops—what number halts before the fortune-giving finger. Don't be scared because you have lost once, pilgrims; I ran this machine in the Black Hills three months, and know of a fellow who lost a thousand dollars a day and won two. Perseverance wins the crown. Sold again and got the tin. Only one more card unsold, gents—here it is—who'll have—9, 10, 11, 12—who wants it?"

"I'll take it!" announced the masked man, laying down a five-dollar bill, and receiving the card.

"And around she goes!" sung the game-keeper, and the wheel was given a vigorous whirl, buzzing swiftly at first, but settling down slowly, and stopping with number ten under the finger.

"Keep the card again," announced the winner, receiving the pool, and shoving out another V.

Again the wheel revolved, and again he won, the finger pointing to 11.

"Better change for luck, young man!" cried the gamesman, coming along and scooping up all the cards upon the board. "Who'll have 'em, gentlemen?"

"Hey; hello! put my card back here!" cried the young gentleman in mask. "If you know when it's healthy for you, you won't take up my keards till I tell you to!"

And the individual in question held a cocked six-shooter in his white hand.

"Come, shove it back here, or I'll put you in a funeral way!"

A murmur of surprise ran through the audience, and with a growl the clerk threw down the card again, and received the awaiting note in exchange.

"Bet your life ye won't make on the card again!" he leered. "No one man can't run this game!"

"Don't be so sure about that, my gay knight!" was the cool reply. "See here!" and the young gentleman of cheek wrote on the blank side of the card, in a graceful hand, "There's my business sign, gentlemen—Omaha Oil. Mebbe ye never heard of me, down in this country?"

"Up in Omaha, you'll find my autograph written on every deck of keards in their city—Omaha Oil, the Masked Terror—the imitator of George Washington, who never told a falsehood—the man that stood on his head on the top of the spire o' Trinity Church! That's the style of a sunflower you'll find me. Sumtimes you'll see I've got a savage fit—caused by memories of past wrongs—an' then ye'd better keep out of my way, or blood 'll be spilt. Go on, old hoss; don't let me interrupt the bizness;" and the stranger took a cigar from his lips, which were reached through an aperture in the brown mask, and blew out a tremendous cloud of perfumed smoke.

Around the gamekeeper whirled the wheel, spitefully, and when the finger pointed to the winning number, it was 14.

Omaha Oil gave vent to a queer little laugh, as he beheld the result.

"See here!" he said, again raising his revolver. "I'm in for havin' this bizness fair. Pilgrims, the wheel's loaded heavily, on one side, which makes it stop at 9, 10, 11, or 12, if not whirled too hard. The rim of the wheel on the lower side, there, is hollow."

"And then in that hollow space, I'll wager my life against a cent you'll find a greater or less quantity of ballast, probably buckshot. I've been watching here, for an hour, ere I began playing!"

Frightful curses escaped the lips of the four villains who managed things behind the counter, and they whipped out their revolvers, in a business-like manner.

"Shoot away! plug it straight at me for all you're worth, you rascals!" cried Omaha Oil, "but first just put in your mind that I've sixty picked men, every one of them dead-shots, who only await my private signal to rush into this caboose and bust this gambling business and its votaries all into the middle of next week. If you don't believe it, just fire off one of your lead-slingers, and I'm bettin' you'll see lively business in this shebang, in short order. Go ahead with your funeral, if you want ter git onto your ear, because I exposed fraud!"

And restoring his revolver to his belt, the young bravo stood facing his enemies, with folded arms and form erect—daring them to begin what he had promised should be a lively affray.

CHAPTER VII.

GIANTS' BATTLE.—"TOOTHPICK" VS. DUFFER.—THE ATTACK.—AND NOTICES.

The manipulators of the "wheel of fortune" hesitated at firing upon the young Nebraskan—hesitated, for they noted the ominous glitter of the black eyes that shone through the holes in his mask—hesitated, because of a rumor that was floating about to the effect that this Omaha Oil and his band had been seen repeatedly in the valley, and were rough-looking customers to handle.

Those gathered outside the ring offered the Bravo no molestation, for they were not too dumb to see that this quarrel, or what threatened to be a quarrel, had been made as much in their behalf as in that of the masked stranger, and it would be more than treacherous for them to interfere.

Yet there was one brawny border-giant among the crowd, immense and muscular of trunk and limb, standing six-foot-six in his boots, who seemed to take it upon himself to exert his energies in behalf of the gamblers, for he elbowed his way through the crowd, and slapped his great human paw down upon Omaha Oil's shoulder, with a force that made the young man flinch. A man less upon his guard than he constantly was, would have gone down.

"Hillo!" the giant roared, a terrible expression upon his great unshaven, stubbly face—"Hillo! ye young jackanapes. What d'ye say?"

"I say, keep yer paws to home!" replied he from Omaha, quickly squirming out of the other's grasp, and dealing him a deft blow in the pit of the stomach, which doubled Mr. Bully up like a jack-knife.

"That's what I say, you big, overgrown elephant; so put it in yer pouch an' smoke it fer terbac!"

A roar like that from a small-sized lion escaped the giant, and with arms outstretched and eyes glaring, he rushed upon the youth as if he would annihilate him.

But at this instant there was a timely intervention, which was probably the luckiest thing that could have happened for the Masked Bravo, as he stood a small chance of victory in a war-hug with the burly bully of Del Norte—Old Jim Duffer was his name, and he was the undisputed "boss" wherever he roamed.

For at this juncture, when the giant sprang forward, intent upon crushing his adversary, the crowd parted, an iron-like hand seized him by the collar, and he was jerked back upon the floor quick enough to cause him to forget all of his past history.

"Thaire!" exclaimed a voice, and the whole of the attacking individual forced a passage into the ring, which had been formed—"thaire ye be, pilgrim, jest as 'ansum a whipped rooster as ther eyes of man

ever rested on. L'arn ter take a feller o' yer size, next time, won't ye—sumthin' o' my stature an' figger, fer instance!"

Bruised and enraged, Duffer crawled back to his feet, and eyed the new-comer, savagely.

"Jem Murray!" he growled.

"The Arkansas Toothpick!" assented the other, politely raising his hat. "Et seems ye ain't fergot yer old friend, Jimsy, in ther days that hev dissolved inter atmosphere, sence we war rivals up in Little Yucatan, in Catamont Gulch. Apparently yer memory hesn't suffered a collapse!"

"You ter—" leered old Duffer, naming a place notoriously remarkable for its torrid temperature. "Guess I don't owe ye nuthin', do I? Reckon ye stuck yer finger inter ther 'rong pie, ye long-geared baboon!"

"Sho! ye ain't got over yer bad habit o' callin' bad names, yit, Jimsy!" commented the seven-foot Toothpick, glancing scornfully down at his adversary. "Ner hain't growed none, either. Ye're a Lilliputian banty, Jimsy—a reg'lar leetle barkin' w'iffet, w'at never bites, unless he ken snap at sum smaller fry than himself. W'y Jimsy, w'at ever stunted yer growth? Ye're no more'n a mouthful!"

"When a hog possesses sich a gol-durned trap like yourn!" retorted Duffer, angrily. "Don't compare birds w' beasts!"

"Oh! o' course not, Jimsy—especially, birds w'at wears white feather!"

"Hey! w'at ye say?" bellowed the other, beginning to prance about like an excited colt. "Whar's ther man thet durst say Jem Duffer ever showed ther white feather. Whar's thet ornery galoot? Show him ter me, thet I may manufacture him inter koyote fodder!"

"Ye needn't luck fer, Jimsy—ye needn't travel across ther continent ter discover thet festive nymph beloved Minnesota Gopher!" spoke the man from Arkansas, grimly, "fer he's hayr, in ther blood-an' flesh—Jem Murray, Toothpick and traveler!"

"You—you durst call me white-featherite, ye durned, long-geared Barnum's What-is-it? You durst tell me I'm a gopher an' a white-featherite?"

"Solemnly, respectfully, feelingly and humanely, dear Jimsy, I do announce thet I durst!"

"Then, I'm goin' ter smash ye—stomp ye, punch ye, an' mutilate ye ontile ye can't stand alone!" cried the Del Norte bully, and drawing himself together, he made a violent lunge at the Toothpick.

They met—they clinched in a grasp of hatred—a hug of death.

Both were men of cast-iron strength, with each muscle properly developed—men whose build and constitution fitted them for battle, and men who were in their highest element when engaged in a pitched combat.

They clinched, and then the contest of strength and resolve began, amid much excitement. Nearly all games were thrown up, and the votaries thereof swarmed around, endeavoring to get a peep into the ring where the two giants were battling. The two bands struck up a lively air, peculiar to the Spanish bull-fighting arenas; lights were turned higher; an intense silence prevailed, only broken by the scuffling of the two men.

Clenched close to each other in a bear-like hug, they weaved to and fro, using all the feints in their power to trip one another, and thus bring the struggle to the floor.

Although the Arkansas Toothpick was full half a foot taller than old Duffer, he was possessed of but little, if any more strength—in fact the two were as nearly equal in this respect as you could have found. Murray was long of limb and neck, and short of trunk, while Duffer was just the opposite—with short, thick limbs, as hard as rock, long body, and a bull-like neck.

Back and forward weaved the two men, locked vise-like in each other's embrace; now lurching heavily to one side; now dragging each other fiercely; lifting, tripping and feinting; it was a marvelous sight to see two such giants baffle each other, when both were infuriated.

"Oh! ye pizen sar-pint—ye beastly human rhinoceros!" roared the Toothpick, as Duffer lodged a cleverly-aimed squirt of tobacco juice in his face and eyes. "I'll show ye, ye reptile—ye ungodly son ov a gopher! Spit in my face will ye? Hurrah!" and the man from Arkansas bent down and grabbed one of the Del Norte's huge ears between his sharp teeth, and buried those fangs into the flesh, until the smaller giant was forced to howl outright from pain.

"Oh! howl, will ye—howl!" roared Toothpick, relaxing his hold long enough to give vent to his overloaded stock of feelings. "I like ter heer it; et's sweet music in my ears. Oh! ye vampire—ye sneak-in' grasshopper! wait let I git warmed up, an' I'll show ye ther kind o' shimplasters they make down in old Arkansas. No remonization thar, I'm tellin' ye; no anti-silver thar, no nothin' thar but men o' sterling squallifications!"

Back, forward, sidewise, they lurched, the Toothpick's tongue vibrating incessantly in companionship with his body. Duffer was "mum," for it required all his attention to "tend to his kniting," and prevent being thrown to the floor. As the case stood now, neither could do the other any material damage. But once the hug was broken, there promised to be banged eyes and broken parts, on one side or the other. And this was what the breathless, excited crowd were eagerly watching for.

Omaha Oil, who had been in a measure the cause of all this disturbance, stood by the counter in the same position of cool indifference he had occupied all along, enjoying the tussle full as much as any of the others.

"Hug him as ef he war yer sweetheart, Toothpick!" he cried, in a clear, ringing voice. "If you want any help, just call on me."

"Oh! I'll squeeze him!" replied the Arkansas man, giving an extra spurt of strength about the bully's waist, until that unlucky individual gave a grunt. "Oh! I'll show him circus-tricks enough to stock a hippodrome!"

At last the bully made a misstep, Murray caught him on it, and both went down to the floor with a crash. Fortunately for him, Duffer's head struck hard enough to render him momentarily insensible; otherwise his countenance would probably have undergone the customary battering, which the Arkansas man kindly dispensed with, when he saw that his adversary was done with.

But he instantly rose to his feet, and glanced around at the sea of faces, with a broad grin.

"Hurra! three cheers for the Arkansas Toothpick!" cried Omaha Oil, springing boldly on top of a table, and waving his slouch hat. "Hip! hip!" and three long cheers rose from the great surging crowd for the long-legged, lanky, ludicrous man from Arkansas.

In the tumult some overjoyed individual emptied the contents of his six-shooters ceilingward, causing a loud roar to go echoing through the great building.

Omaha Oil uttered a curse upon this action, and clenched his hands about a pair of pistol-butts.

"Fly! fly!" he yelled, his stern, clear voice reaching every corner of the Palace. "Some accursed fool, by firing off that revolver, has signaled for my men, the Black Avengers. Fly! fly! all you that would save your lives, for it will be useless for you to try to resist!"

Then, with an agile leap into midnight air, the Masked Terror went like a rocket over the heads of the electrified assemblage, struck the door, bounded through an open casement, and was gone.

And with his departure a motley crowd, numbering upward of a hundred black-clad, masked horsemen, burst into the great gambling palace, through windows, doors, and every accessible ground entrance, and from their revolvers came flash after flash, report after report, until a pandemonium of noises prevailed, and the room was clouded with smoke.

Screams of affright from the females and fearful curses from the Del Norteans arose on either side; dead and dying were lying under foot; in haste the gamblers hurled chairs and tables aside, and the lights were extinguished, leaving darkness reigning supreme.

This proved the salvation of those within the great hall, to a large extent, for under cover of darkness they were able to escape, and but very few of the Black Avengers' bullets made a count.

In five minutes after the lights were extinguished not a soul of the living were within the Palace, for the outlaws had also taken their departure.

That was the first direct attack by prairie rovers that Del Norte's inhabitants had ever experienced, although affrays and other ruffianly mees among the herders were common occurrences.

And after that night a terrible dread of the Masked Terror and his Black Avengers prevailed in the little city by Rio Grande's sullen waters. Many were afraid to stir out after dark, for fear of encountering the scourge, and the gambling Palace was not nearly as full as usual.

The Del Norteans kept more within their own doors, and the herders invariably went and came in squads, for they feared the outlaw alliance full more than the gamblers, for they had cause. Upon every line-pole of the valley herding plains, for miles in either direction, was pasted a printed notice, couched in the following words:

"NOTICE: To all whom it may concern! The late fire upon the prairie, which destroyed the old El Gamin ranch, and outbuildings, was attended by a massacre, at the said ranch, and there—an old man, a mother and her baby boy, were the victims. This crime was committed by the Prairie League, a band of ruffian herders, who, leagued together, are bound by oath to work together, sin or each other, murder for each other, and die for each other. Each of the thirty herders and ruffians belonging to said League, all of whom were concerned in this latest outrage upon innocent herders and settlers, are marked, and we the Avengers and Regulators of the Rio Grande del Norte, shall do our duty, until every dog has been hung, or shot. The leaders' names are here given: Captain Bill Monte, old Jim Duffer, Dresden La Monte, Hawk Harrington, and Hank Murdock. The names of the others are all known, and each shall meet his fate. The Red Cross, will signify the hand of the Black Avengers. OMAHA OIL."

No wonder then that there was a feeling of dread among the herders, and also among certain ones of Del Norte's citizens, for some there were of them who were connected with the Prairie League. Just below the above notice was invariably posted another notice, of less importance to some, and of more to others.

It was penned in a big sprawling hand, and contained the following:

"WANTED: Information of a man calkylated ter abound in these ere immerget vicinity, whose callin' aire thet u a gambler—war one time a Leftenant in Cortina's band—and whose name aire El Gamin, or sum sich like. Would like ter see this interstern' individual fer about six minnits an' twelve seconds on important bizness. Address or hunt up:—JEM MURRAY, Arkansas Toothpick: To be continued!"

CHAPTER VIII.

ENEMIES MEET GENERALLY.

WITHIN the hacienda of the Harringtons, all was neatness and comfort. The quaint though elegant old Spanish furniture was retained, and the carpets, and the grand pictures upon the ceiled walls. Everywhere a fine taste of arrangement was displayed, and evidences of a woman's hand in the work.

And pretty Miss Ella was the mistress now, for her

mother was getting old and infirm. Ella was a good girl, free-spirited, well-educated, and well-liked; indeed, she had two lovers who had already declared their passion for her. These were Dean Redwood, and a young dark-faced gentleman named Cyril Duane, who was surrounded in a film of mystery. With him Ella met in secret, they having a trysting-place on the shore of the river. Dean Redwood came to the hacienda, frequently, was well-liked by the family, with one exception, and it was believed that he was to become the future husband of the young belle of the valley, for as such Miss Harrington had been repeatedly acknowledged.

The one exception mentioned was the young herder, Hawk Harrington. For some reason, he seemed to bear the suitor of his sister a strong enmity.

Why, or whence began this hatred, was a secret between the two men—a secret which was not soon to be divulged through their instrumentality.

A few nights after the raid upon the Oriental Palace by Omaha Oil and his men, Dean Redwood galloped down to the farm-house on his favorite charger, a powerful-spirited gray, and dismounting, entered the parlor, where Miss Ella was usually waiting for him on the evenings of his visits.

But she was not in the parlor, to-night, and thinking she had just stepped out for a moment, he seated himself to await her return.

"I must have an answer, to-night, sure!" he mused, staring at the fire, that shone in the grate—the first fire heralding the approach of winter. "She can decide the matter—must decide it, for I care not to stay here, after seeing that Prairie Patrol. That she is the same one—ah! there can be no mistake! Alive and as beautiful as ever, but, alas! insane! Would to God Fred Arlington had completed the work he began! It would have saved her all this suffering. How she ever escaped death when he pitched her from that cliff to the gulch bottom, a hundred feet below, I can never imagine."

At this juncture there was an audible footstep, and Hawk Harrington came striding into the room. Redwood instantly arose from his seat upon the sofa, and the gaze of the two men met, unflinchingly. Harrington evidently had not expected to find his enemy there, for he started, then muttered an oath.

"Where is Ella?" he demanded, gruffly.

"I do not know," Redwood replied, watching the herder, narrowly. "She has doubtlessly stepped out somewhere, and will soon return."

"And you are waiting for her?"

"I am."

"What for?"

"None of your business, sir. I came to talk with her—not you."

"Oh! you needn't give us any of your slack!" he growled back, fiercely. "I'm boss of this ranch, and for two bits I'd tumble you out."

"Oh! would you?" retorted Redwood, as fiercely as his enemy. "Maybe it would be healthy for you to try it. You will find me no saint, I'll warrant you. If you begin the battle, I shall strike to kill!"

Harrington growled some muttered imprecation, and sprang forward, with a long, dangerous-looking knife in his grasp.

The villain meant murder.

But Redwood was not to be cut down without a struggle. He had roughed it in the early part of his life in the mines; was a Hercules in strength, a master in all athletic sports, and a dangerous man to meet with knife or pistol.

He was now, however, as you might say, at the mercy of his antagonist, for he was unarmed, while in addition to his knife, Hawk Harrington carried a small arsenal of revolvers in his belt.

But Redwood was on the watch for him as he came rushing forward, and clenching the upraised arm of the ruffian, which grasped the knife, he threw his other arm about his waist, and tripped him to the floor.

Both men went down together, and in the fall Redwood received an ugly cut in the breast from the knife. But in an instant more he had the blade in his possession.

"Now, beg, curse you!" he cried, holding the young herder down as easily as though he had been a baby. "Beg, and promise to mend your ways, or I'll plunge this knife into your heart. You know I hold the power to hang you, and I marvel that you dare to provoke me, lest I exert it."

"I'll not beg; nor will I tell you that which you wish to know!" the herder growled, savagely.

"What do you mean? What is there that you know that would benefit me, had I the possession of that knowledge?" Redwood demanded.

"Bah! don't think I'm a fool because I've got you down upon the enemy list, my sharp. Thought no one knew why you came to Del Norte, didn't you? But there's where you made a mistake. We knew of your coming, long ago, and closed up the holes, like ground-mice do, in the winter. You may search a lifetime, and you'll not find the place you seek—the head-quarters of the Prairie League!"

Redwood started, and a grim expression settled upon his face.

"You are mistaken!" he ventured.

"You lie—I am not mistaken!" Hawk Harrington replied, triumphantly. "You are Dean Redwood, alias Cunning Cass Cameron, the ex-Government Spy. Oh! you needn't feign astonishment, nor you needn't attempt to leave Del Norte, for you will be met by a party of gentlemen, who will boost you half-way up to a limb, and hold you there by the aid of a tow string until a reaction occurs and your spirit flies away."

"Sho! you don't say!"

"You'll find out, if you attempt to sneak out and fetch reinforcements. Stay here in Del Norte, a good, honest, law-abiding citizen, and I'll guarantee you'll be all right!"

"Humph! you'll guarantee, you say. Perhaps you are one of the ringleaders of this Prairie League, whose existence it is my purpose to break up. I ought to arrest you!"

"All correct; arrest if you think it will be a healthy undertaking. I'm mighty sure you'd not take me far, ere you'd wish you'd left me here."

"I shall let you go at present!" Cass Cameron said, first disarming his enemy, and then allowing him to rise to his feet. "I have other work to perform, ere I am ready for you—work which I shall push with a will. I only lack a few more points of compass, ere I can put my tools where I want them, and execute my work in triumph."

Then bowing, the ex-Government Spy turned on his heel and quitted the hacienda, leaving Hawk Harrington standing in the center of the parlor, swearing at the ease with which his enemy had mastered him.

The Government Spy hurried from the yard that encircled the hacienda, and down toward the tree-fringed river, for here he perceived his horse had wandered, in cropping the herbage. He reached the animal, and was about to vault into the saddle, when the sound of voices reached his ear, and he paused and listened. They were not far away, and in low conversation, yet the ex-Spy recognized one of the speakers as Ella Harrington.

Curiosity and burning jealousy tempted the man to creep forward, and act as an eavesdropper—jealousy, because he dearly loved the young belle of the valley, and because she had declared she loved no one but him. And did this not look suspicious?

Decidedly so, the Spy thought, when he crept upon a bluff near the edge of the water, and looking down beheld the object of his choice sitting side by side, in a boat that rocked upon a sluggish eddy, with a dark-faced man with mustache and imperial, in whose embrace she was closely clasped.

Cameron started violently, and for several moments could but remain motionless—struck dumb with astonishment.

He could not believe his eyes—it seemed a mocking dream, when he remembered how only the evening before he had told her of his passion for her, and she had innocently declared the same for him. And yet, here she was, in the arms and receiving the caresses of another, as if she had never known the existence of another lover.

As if aware of the presence of a spectator, the two lovers in the boat lowered their tone so that their words were inaudible at any distance, and only the painful, regretful satisfaction of watching them, was left the Spy. Yet he held his position.

The moon came up and showered its light down through openings in the forest branches, and wreathed the twain in the boat in a glory of gold and white. Still they were conversing lowly, apparently content to be near each other—neglectful that the night was striding on toward another dawning.

At last, however, the man released the girl from his embrace, and seizing an oar, whirled the boat back against the shore where it had first rested, previous to being converted into a lover's tryst.

He next assisted the valley belle to the dry ground, and then paused, taking her hand in his.

"Adios, senorita, and may this short interview have given you the same degree of pleasure it has me. Adios!"

Then he turned, as if about to stride away, and—came face to face with Hawk Harrington.

The burly herdsman had stolen up, unperceived, and stood glaring fiercely at the guilty pair, each of his hands gripping a cocked revolver.

"Well?" he interrogated, in a harsh voice, "what is the meaning of this disgraceful midnight meeting. Ellen, I am astonished!"

"Oh! Hawk, do not harm him!" entreated the girl, clinging to the arm of her lover. "This is Cyril—Mr. Duane, my—my—"

"Evil genius!" sneered the brother. "Your professed lover no doubt, until he has sufficiently blinded you for his devilish purpose; then it will be different. Whoa! up, thar, my gay Lothario! Don't be in so much of a hurry to take leave."

"Well, sir, what can I do for you?" Duane asked, turning back and facing his enemy. "Though I am unarmed, I am neither afraid of you nor any of your style. What do you want?"

"I want ter know what you're doin' out here with my sister, alone, an' ther hour bordering upon midnight? That's what!"

"Then, my reply is that it is none of your business!" Duane declared, coolly. "Were you the young lady's father, my answer would be different; but you've no business to ask!"

"Hain't I? Mebbe ye don't know who I am! I'm Hawk Harrington, and I can shoot. No doubt you can do ditto. In that event I'll lend you one of my revolvers. That's the quickest way to settle a matter of this kind."

"I won't fight!" decided the other. "I have nothing against you, and want not your life. Besides, I am no shot with the revolver, and my life would surely pay the forfeit of so rash a risk!"

"So much the better. Thunder!" suddenly ejaculated the herdsman, and he leaped back a pace in astonishment. The bright moonlight falling upon the countenance of the other, for the first made a startling discovery to the herder.

"You devil, you're El Gamin!"

Duane smiled, oddly.

"Well, what if I am?" he demanded. "Duane is my real name—El Gamin a nom de plume."

"What became of the real El Gamin, who used to herd it, in this valley?"

"Don't know, I'm sure."

"You are he!" positively.

"Pshaw! don't be deceived."

"Neither I am. You are El Gamin, the luckiest gambler in Colorado, and a traitor to the League."

"I am not able to make a denial to fit each of those accusations!" El Gamin replied, coolly.

"And there is no need that you should. You must fight, or I will shoot you in your tracks. The League will give money for your head!"

"Why should they? Though a deserter, they have suffered no betrayal by me!"

"You lie! You it was who first put Cunningham Cass Cameron on track. Here! will you take it?"

And the herder extended a choice of his two handsome revolvers.

El Gamin bowed, and accepted the heavier of the pair.

He was averse to shooting when avoidable, but he saw that there was no hope for it now.

The proper distance was paced off, and the two men took their places. Poor Ella had sunk upon the ground, a little ways off, and was weeping violently.

To her it seemed nothing less than murder, this dueling.

But the duel was destined not to take place, for at this juncture, Cass Cameron, the ex-Spy, dashed forward between the two adversaries, with a sharp cry.

"Hold!" he commanded, fiercely. "No fighting, here. I'll settle this business, if you please. Hawk Harrington, take your faithless sister and return to your hacienda. I'll tend to this notorious sharp!"

Harrington put up his revolver, and turned to obey. Strange it was, but the man held a dread of the ex-Government Spy—was awed into submission in his presence.

Yet Cunningham Cass Cameron, as he was known among the frontier border-ruffians, had few as bitter enemies as this Hawk Harrington; who, arousing his sister, supported her upon his strong arm, and they made their way toward the hacienda.

When they reached it, and disappeared from view, the Spy turned upon—not El Gamin, but nothing!

The card-sharp had as suddenly and mysteriously disappeared as though he had been swallowed up in the earth!

Evidently, he was a coward!

CHAPTER IX.

THE MASKED TERROR EQUALS HIS NAME.—THE PLOT OF THE LEAGUE.—OFF ON SCENT.

On the following day an emigrant train passed through Del Norte. They were bound for Santa Sina, further up the valley, where they proposed to go into winter quarters, and wait the coming of spring, before continuing their journey. There were but four wagons, and the caravan was evidently rather a poverty-stricken one.

But an hour's halt was made in Del Norte; then the train continued on over the well-beaten trail through the beautiful valley—the trail over which more emigration to the Rockies had passed than by most any other route.

Three miles out from Del Norte, while the wagons were hidden from view in the hollow of a prairie wave, they were surprised by a band of masked horsemen, who rode down and surrounded them without an instant's notice.

There were fifty of them, at least, mounted upon powerful animals, and armed with polished-barrel repeating-rifles; desperate-looking men, generally, who had roughed it upon the border all their lives.

In advance was the Masked Terror of the valley—Omaha Oil, the young Regulator, both of which he was.

The emigrants were about to defend themselves and open a battle, but the clear voice of Omaha Oil, ringing out like a bugle, bade them desist.

"Hold! fire not, unless you would seal your own doom!" he cried, "for we mean you no harm. We simply come for the traitor-villain who is trying to escape his doom by going with you. Haul him out and deliver him up, and I'll guarantee you no trouble will be necessary. La Mort—Dresden La Mort, one of the ringleaders of the Prairie League, is the man I want, sir!"

"There is no such man in our caravan, sir!" stoutly averred one of the emigrants. "I kin give ye all their names of our party, ef ye like; we're all from one town in Iowa."

"Bah! you cannot deceive me, old man. The fellow is known to be secreted in one of your four wagons. The sooner you haul him out the better it will be for you."

"In our wagons? Impossible, sir!"

"Quite possible, old man, although you may not be aware of the fact. Is not the last vehicle, yonder, a store-wagon?"

"It is, though I don't see how you guessed it, as all the sides are closed down," was the reply.

"I knew it all the same, however," Omaha Oil assured. "Be kind enough to take a peep into that wagon, and you will no doubt find the man we want—the double-dyed villain and ruffian you are harboring."

"All right, sir. If there is such a party in our company, unknown, and he is such a villain as you represent, you are welcome to him, despite the fact that your authority in demanding him is questionable."

"Not at all questionable, sir. We are a band of Avengers and Regulators, warring against the ruffianism of this border!" Omaha Oil answered, unhesitatingly. "The Prairie League is composed of a gang of ruffianly herders, who prey mercilessly upon you emigrants, and commit acts more frightfully criminal than even the red-skins, themselves. I have been one of the sufferers, and my men with me!"

Without a word the settlers left their wagons, and advanced to the rear "schooner," driven by a Texan, and containing mainly the baggage of the caravan, the other wagons carrying the emigrants and their families.

Jabez Hendricks, the supervisor of the little

caravan, was a gruff but honest old farmer, and it was not his purpose to shelter a fugitive scoundrel be it even from death. So he headed his companions, and they advanced upon the "hind wagon, which was driven by the fat Texan, named Sam. Omaha Oil and his men were drawn up on their horses on the left side of the train, awaiting the deliverance of a subject whom it was their intention to punish with death, as a retribution for his numberless crimes.

But, ere the covers at the rear or front end of the "schooner" could be raised, there was a succession of sharp pistol reports, and Hendricks and two of his companions fell backward badly wounded.

The tiger in his cage had clawed at his enemies. But this did not deter the other men from doing their duty; they leaped forward, tore aside the canvas coverings, and hauled the stowaway out upon the ground.

Omaha Oil rode forward, a triumphant laugh breaking from his masked lips.

"Ha! ha! didn't I tell you? There is the outlaw of half a score of brutal border outrages, gentlemen!" he cried. "Dresden La Mort is his name, and a worse character is hard to find. Knights of Vengeance, you see the vile wretch who has struck each of you a blow or more through the agency of the Prairie League. Take him and do your duty."

The Avengers rode forward, and dismounted, a number of them seizing the unlucky La Mort, and securely binding him. Then he was borne off to a lone prairie tree, but a few yards distant, and preparations were made for his final launching into eternity.

A rope of good, stout material was shirred about his neck, and the remaining end thrown over a branch overhead. Then he was raised to a standing position, and a dozen hands seized the pulling end of the fatal halter.

But they did not "boost" him, these Prairie Avengers, but waited until Omaha Oil addressed the doomed outlaw, as appeared to be his desire.

After gazing at La Mort a moment in silence, the young Masked Terror spoke:

"Dresden La Mort, you are about to pay the penalty of your crimes!" he said, sternly. "You have thrown away the life that God gave you—wasted your worth and manliness, until you are a low, degraded wretch, of the vilest order. Your career has been one of unblushing crime, and crime, too, of the most repulsive character. In this day of discussion on the possibilities of there being such a place as hell, it is not for me to say as to your fate after death; but I should not care to stand in your tracks. Therefore it behooves you to repent—to ask forgiveness of your God ere it is too late. Also, I want you to tell me of the location of the stronghold of the League, and if you know aught of the wife of my—of Deadwood Dick?"

"I'll tell you nothing!" growled La Mort, fiercely. "You cannot turn me into a traitor; I'll betray no secret of the League; so go and lynch me as soon as you can. I am not afraid to die."

"Then it will be so much the easier for you!" Oil said, grimly, waving his hand to the executioners. "Up with him, boys!"

There was a long pull and a strong pull at the rope, and Dresden La Mort was swinging in mid-air.

Night upon the prairies of San Luis valley, through which creep the wandering waters of Rio Grande Del Norte.

Night, in December, with the warmth of late spring—with the soft balmy breezes and sounds of nature peculiar to the time—to the hour. Rolling down from the herding-plains comes the bawl of cattle, and the blare of trumpets; on the plains, over which an impenetrable gloom has fallen, faintly gleam the "line" lamps perched upon their signal-posts, like diminutive light-houses scattered upon an ocean's wavy expanse. Birds of night are in the air, and send up their weird noises; two persons are out upon the prairie, enveloped in the gloom, engaged in unguarded conversation.

One a man, tall and brawny and evil of face and feature, roughly dressed, and armed to the teeth, with belt weapons and rifle.

The other was a woman, attired in a trailing white wrapper, while over her head was a filmy mass of silken lace-work. She was very beautiful, both in face and form, and stood close to the man, one arm resting lovingly over the bowed head of a superb white stallion, and the remaining hand grasping a rifle.

It was a strange tableau, in the gloom of the coming night.

The woman was speaking.

"You have the messages, now, so take your departure, and bear them to your chief. Tell him that Lestie, the Prairie Patrol, fell into possession of them by chance, and sends them to the League, that there may be a haul made."

"Very well, my lady. I will obey your orders, at once. Is there any other word to bear our chief?"

"None, Pedrillo; give him the dispatch, and tell him that Prairie Patrol sent you."

The man bowed, humbly, and was turning away, when Lestie called him back.

"Ho! Pedrillo! I have something to ask you ere you go. The chief has a new woman in his stronghold, I hear?"

The man was silent—neither answered in the affirmative or in the negative. Probably he had been drilled heretofore.

"Speak!" Lestie cried, sharply—"tell me the truth of the matter, or I'll show you what are the consequences of defying a Queen of the Plains. Who is this woman?"

Still Pedrillo hesitated to answer the question.

Hesitated until he felt the muzzle of Prairie Patrol's revolver against his heart; then he answered:

"There is a woman, my lady, but I was told to keep the news from you!" he said, grimly.

"Ha! you were to have secrets from me, too, eh? And the chief, also! Curses on you, both! Who is this woman in the stronghold?"

"I know not, ma'am. The chief brought her, but I do not know where from. He calls her Drooping Lily."

The strange Prairie Patrol gave utterance to a wild strange laugh.

"Drooping Lily! Ha! ha! ha! what a silly name! The chief is evidently in love. Tell him that Lestie wants to see him."

"Very well, my lady!" and the messenger turned upon his heel and stalked away into the gloom. Prairie Patrol then sprang into the saddle, and dashed off upon her horse in a different direction.

"The chief has forgotten me in the presence of another?" she muttered, fiercely. "That is the way with men;—to my utter ruin, I have found them false and deceitful. Oh! how I hate them, and yet I yearn for a different life than this. Who will take me, sin-stained, as I am?"

Pedrillo the courier of the Prairie League started off upon his return to the stronghold, without suspecting that he was observed.

But such, however, was the case. Not a dozen yards from the spot where occurred the interview between the Prairie Patrol and the messenger, was crouching in the deep grass that grew in a damp buffalo-bed, a horse and a man. Both lay perfectly quiet during the conversation of the twain, the man eagerly listening to catch every word. Then when Pedrillo and Lestie separated and started off in different directions, the man rose cautiously to his feet, and bade his sagacious animal to do likewise.

"Now, Clipper, we are upon the scent!" the spy muttered, patting the black upon his arching neck, and then vaulting into the saddle. We have but to follow the messenger to find out what is up."

The speaker was the Masked Terror! Like a phantom of the night he had stolen up and overheard the conversation of the female Patrol and the messenger, which was of a nature to lead him to suppose that something of importance was on the tapis, which concerned the Prairie League.

Accordingly, with no thought of fear, the young Regulator set off in pursuit of the messenger—not in hot pursuit, but in a creeping, stealthy pursuit, his steed moving along with the carefulness of a cat.

"On, Clipper, old boy! Hug him close, but don't give him warning of your coming. If I can get close enough to cast a lasso over him, I mean to learn the contents of those dispatches he is bearing."

But, it was a delicate job to approach sufficiently near to achieve a success, without being discovered by the messenger, who could easily escape by plunging into the tall prairie grass, and crawling away. On the Masked Terror urged his faithful steed, and the animal seemed to understand that speed and caution were required of it.

But Pedrillo was wide awake, and the flash of a pistol and the singing of a bullet, warned Omaha Oil that he had been discovered. But in that flash he had caught a glimpse of the messenger's form only a few yards ahead, and quickly drawing his revolver, he discharged three barrels in rapid succession.

The result was more than expected. There was a great yell of pain, and the sound of a heavy body falling to the ground; then, on riding on, the Regulator found his victim outstretched in the grass.

He dismounted and bent over the man, and found that he was dead. One of the bullets had entered his ear, another through his left side, plowing into his heart, and producing instant death.

A short search discovered the papers Pedrillo had received from Prairie Patrol. There were two different documents, the first reading as follows:

"CHIEF OF PRAIRIE LEAGUE:—Large miners' train from the Rockies will come down the valley to-morrow night. Big amount of gold in their possession; so you'd best lay for it. LESTIE."

The other paper read as follows:

"Pass forty-fifth line-pole; twenty horse-lengths due south-west; hell below; heaven above!"

Which ended that strange communication.

"It's a clew to the stronghold of the Prairie League!" muttered Omaha Oil, grimly. "I am on the scent at last, and must pursue it."

Leaving the messenger lying where he had fallen, he sprang upon Clipper's back, and dashed away.

CHAPTER X.

FIGHTING RUFFIANS.

OMAHA OIL, as the reader may already have guessed, was no less a person than the ex-road-agent, Deadwood Dick, whom we left by the side of the dying Annihilator.

We ended his acquaintance, there, rather abruptly. Let us go back for a moment, and review his past, since then.

Leaving Old Avalanche lying, as he supposed, stark and stiff in death, the Prince of the Road turned toward the ruins of his cosy home, to procure some sharp instrument with which to dig a grave, for he would not leave the spot without giving the old scout a decent burial.

On his way he came upon the lifeless body of his infant son, and standing there and gazing upon the beautiful child he had so idolized, next to his darling Leone, he raised his clenched right hand toward the firelit sky, and registered an oath of vengeance before God—an oath to avenge his triple loss, though

the consummation of that vengeance absorbed the remainder of his natural life.

He went back then and laid the babe beside the scout, after which he retraced his steps toward the ruined hacienda, in search of a shovel or spade, with which to dig a grave.

After wandering about for half an hour, in the black track left by the fire, he found the implements required, and hastened back upon the prairie to perform his last ghastly labor for the dead.

But great was his astonishment on arriving at the spot where he had left the bodies, to find that they had both strangely disappeared! Gone, but where?

They were nowhere in the immediate neighborhood, as a close search proved; yet they were gone, and the question was where and how?—a question that Deadwood Dick could not answer.

Had the sneaking coyotes come and dragged them off to perpetrate more indignities upon their persons?

The thought was maddening to Deadwood Dick, yet he was powerless to help himself. He could only curse the fate that had ever pursued him.

At last when morning was near at hand, he turned his back upon the ruined hacienda, and strode away.

For twenty-eight hours, he prowled about in the vicinity of Del Norte, without food or rest.

Then he fell in with a band of valley settlers, who, under the titles of "Avengers" and "Regulators," were organizing for a campaign against the "Prairie League," and they had chosen him their leader, well knowing of his dauntlessness from report.

Thus, under the name of Omaha Oil, and in deep disguise, the former road-agent of Black Hills notoriety, had become a Regulator.

In his new comrades he found a set of men who had nearly all received injury at the hands of the valley outlaws, and were eager to revenge themselves; men who were inured to border warfare and would face death a hundred fold to accomplish their aims.

And they found in Omaha Oil, as we shall still continue to call him, a leader who was brave and daring to a fault; who never shirked duty at the approach of danger; who held as little fear of his fellow-men as a giant would of a pigmy.

And thus having shown how Deadwood Dick became a Regulator chief, we will resume the thread of our narrative, and pursue it to the end, with as little digression as possible.

We left Omaha Oil dashing away across the prairie, after obtaining the dispatches from the outlaw messenger, Pedrillo.

"The den of this League of Evil must be twenty horse's lengths from the forty-fifth line-pole!" he muttered, as he sped along, sitting in his saddle as though bound there; "or else what is the meaning of this message? I would give a half-year of my life to be able to pounce in upon those outlaws, and show them what is the vengeance of a wronged man. But, the idea of following up this clew must now be dispelled. Here is another duty—to get together my men, and prepare to aid this train of miners. A year ago I should have been as willing to have relieved them of their spoils as I am now to assist them."

He rode swiftly on through the moonlit night, for that luminary had just raised its face above the horizon, looking guilty at its own tardiness in rising.

His horse he had recently purchased of an old Spaniard, who was finishing training him for the circus, and a handsome beast he was, with black glossy coat and limbs like polished steel, together with an arching neck and flowing mane.

Broad of chest and thin of flank he was a fleet traveler as Omaha Oil had proven on more than one occasion. And yet he was to be given another chance, for a wild piercing cry welled up piteously upon the night—a woman's scream, fraught with keenest terror and indignation.

It reached the ears of Omaha Oil, and in an instant he was all attention. His head was bent forward, and his piercing gaze swept the moonlit prairies.

Then about a mile away, he caught an indistinct view of a flying horse and rider, but was not able to identify the same.

"It's a woman in trouble at least!" he muttered, gathering the reins tighter, and throwing his feet out of the stirrups. "Now, Clipper, away, and let it not be said that you or your master hesitated to strike in the defense of a woman. Away!"

And off at the Masked Terror's command bounded the black charger, at a wild rate of speed, with head stretched out on an even with its back, and mane and tail streaming back gracefully.

And Omaha Oil rode literally with the horse, his motion and graceful movement corresponding exactly with that of the steed.

On—on; it took but a few moments to prove that they were galloping, although the fugitive's horse was one of no ordinary speed and endurance. And a dark scowl was upon the face of the fugitive, as he noted how rapidly his pursuer was gaining.

"Curse the luck!" he growled, gazing alternately toward the on-coming Masked Terror, and into the fair white face of the captive he carried in his arms, "that fellow is bound to overhaul me, and give me trouble. I wish I had left the girl in her home; women have ever been a curse to me, yet I cannot let them alone. And that chap is Omaha Oil the Masked Terror, too. What can he want of me?"

What, indeed, but to rescue a female captive, whose cry had appealed to his heart and hearing.

"On, Clipper!" We are gaining as one wave gains upon another in the surf!" Omaha Oil said, urging on his noble charger. His hat and mask were now off and in the saddle-bags; his handsome face was illuminated with a glow of pleasurable excitement;

his dark magnetic eyes gleamed sharply, and his long hair blew back in a cloud upon the night breeze.

In his hand he held coiled a lasso ready for instant use, one end of it being secured to his saddle-bow. Nearer and nearer he drew to the fugitive, Clipper seeming to realize just what was required of him.

On—on; the thud, thud of horse's feet beat a strange tattoo upon the prairie sod; the late moon looked down serenely; the stars twinkled in heaven's mighty dome; the prairie-dogs barked; birds uttered shrill cries at being disturbed from their peaceful slumbers; on dashed the pursued and the pursuer; animal spirits were at rivalry, while those of the two men were hopeful and defiant.

But closer—closer they grew—both men could see each other distinctly, now; both were somewhat amazed, for the resemblance between them was startling. Deadwood Dick's cast of countenance was given each, and in form they were not unlike. Omaha Oil instantly made up his mind as to the identity of the fugitive. It was the El Gamin, at whom the Prairie League had struck, when they killed Avalanche, Leone, and the babe, and destroyed his pretty home upon the banks of the Rio Grande Del Norte.

El Gamin, the great Gambler Prince.

On—on—nearer, until Clipper's nose was brushed by the tail of the fugitive's horse—then Omaha Oil spoke.

"Hold! Why continue this race, sir gambler? Already I have run you down; it will require but the work of a moment to unseat you from your saddle, by using my lasso. So you may as well pull in."

"What do you want?" El Gamin demanded, turning in his saddle, fiercely. "Why have you dogged me in this way?"

"Because a woman's scream pealed to my manly nature, and called me to the rescue!" Omaha Oil replied, proudly. "You seem to be a kidnapper as well as gambler, according to this bundle;" and the young Chief of the Regulators laid his hand upon the bundle El Gamin carried, for he was now close enough to enable him to do so. "I demand an explanation!"

"By what right, pray?"

"In the name of the 'Regulators and Avengers,' sir gambler. I am Omaha Oil, the Masked Terror; or, Deadwood Dick, the reformed ex-road-agent, as you like!"

El Gamin uttered an exclamation of surprise, and drew rein abruptly.

"You Deadwood Dick!" he repeated, in astonishment; "you the Black Hills road-agent?"

"I was; yes!"

"Then you are my enemy."

"I presume so!" with that old peculiar laugh. "I am most every one's enemy, that finds it convenient to make me so. Don't know that I have a true friend living, down in this country, unless perchance there may be some of the aforesaid among my band. In what way have I encroached upon your good grace?"

"You killed my brother, Fred Audley; I shall undertake to avenge him!" El Gamin said, bitterly.

"Ah!" Omaha Oil started. "You were his brother, eh?" Then his memory went back to those days in the wild, strange life in the Black Hills, and a lonely, homesick feeling assailed him. "Fred Audley was a traitor!"

"A traitor! Bah! he was not more of a traitor than you. You are a traitor to your country and to your fellow-men, and deserve nothing more than a good stout limb with a rope and your neck attached to it!"

"Ah! do you really think so? We won't dispute about that, for no matter what my past has been, my present I am faithfully trying to improve. You say you are my enemy. What do you propose to do, that you may work off the strength of your towering passion?"

"We will fight if you dare. Do you know how to use the knife?"

"Well, providing you set a plate of uncut venison before me, I might be able to handle one end of such an instrument!" the Regulator replied, with a cool composure that annoyed the gambler. "But if you say razor, razor it is!" And out of the saddle the young man vaulted.

"Shall I assist your charge to the ground, sir gambler?"

"You may lay her upon the grass until we settle this matter!" El Gamin assented, yielding up his captive, who was bound hand and foot. "We will fight in the saddle!"

"As well that way as any other!" Omaha Oil replied, laying the girl upon the grass, and with lightning celerity severing her bonds. "Now, miss, in an undertone, 'when we get to fighting, briskly, you creep away, at a safe distance, and then put for home, wherever that is.'"

"I have no home. I am alone in this strange country—a lone!" was the whispered reply.

A sharp exclamation from El Gamin at this juncture called the Regulator's attention.

"Look! look!" the gambler exclaimed, excitedly, pointing up the valley, which was flooded with moonlight.

"We are between enemies all around. Yonder come the Prairie League outlaws; we have the choice of racing fifteen straight miles for shelter, or fighting. Which shall it be? We cannot afford to be enemies, now; we must join our forces!"

"As you like. I bear you no ill-will, except for abducting this maiden. No! we'll not run. Dismount, and make your animal lie down. We can easily defend ourselves, I think, for I see you carry a Remington repeating rifle, and my Evans, here, is good for thirty-four shots."

El Gamin accordingly dismounted, and at a word his horse as well as that of Omaha Oil, lay out-

stretched upon the ground; then the two men crouched behind their respective barricades, and awaited the attack of the ruffian herders and outlaws who composed the Prairie League.

Oil had taken care to draw the young maiden to his shelter, and now that he had time to gaze at her, he perceived that she was rather comely of face and form—evidently a child of western culture—for she was not yet sixteen.

A glance at her; then the young Regulator turned his attention to the danger that was coming up in front.

Of the horsemen there were at least thirty, all armed with rifles, who carried "arms," as they rode.

Ahead of them, barking and quarreling among themselves, were a pack of Texan cattle-dogs*—and Omaha Oil uttered an exclamation fraught with doubt, as he beheld them.

He knew them to be savage and stubborn in battle—knew they were more to be feared than the human wolves behind them.

"What is it?" El Gamin asked, laying his revolver before him, and grasping his repeating rifle, firmly. "You think we—"

"Will have business to attend to, if we want to get out of this alive!" Omaha Oil replied, grimly. "There are twelve dogs that must die first, and then nearly three times that number of outlaws to follow. Get ready! One, two, three!"

Then the two defenders' rifles rung out spitefully, and though the distance was against them, two of the dogs went down.

But, still, with wild exultant yells the outlaws came rushing on. Now, they were but five hundred yards away!

CHAPTER XI.

FIGHTING BRUTES.—THE MINERS' CAMP.

On—on they came like a charging army, their exulting yells making strange echoes resound over the rolling expanse of prairie, upon which the old moon threw a pale, sickly radiance. Yet light enough was there to enable things to be seen distinctly at some distance, and Omaha Oil and El Gamin, the Gambler Prince, could see the savage jubilation expressed in the hard, grim faces of the oncoming outlaws.

"Ready! Fire again! We must not lose a moment, or we are dead men, and subject to a horrible fate, ten times worse than ordinary death!" the young Regulator cried, again bringing his rifle to bear. "See! they are drawing rein and setting on the dogs to do the work of destruction, while they look on and laugh. Ready, comrade. One! two! make your bullets count, and send them in quick succession! three and fire!"

It was indeed as Oil had said.

The outlaws had drawn rein just out of close rifle-shot, and while they sat in their saddles, were setting on the savage *calcooties*,† or cattle-dogs.

And the brutes knew just what was expected of them, apparently, for they came on, howling and barking, and quarreling over which was to be in at the death, first.

At Omaha's word "fire," both his gun and that of El Gamin rung forth, sharply, and unerring were the bullets, for two of the remaining eight dogs went to the ground, lifeless; yet on came the rest nearer and nearer at every leap—in two minutes they would be at hand, savage and ferocious, thirsting for human blood.

One monster brute in the lead seemed to be the commander of the gang, and he was apparently impregnable; for six times did Omaha Oil fire at him, in quick succession, but without effect. On the fierce brute came, his eyes gleaming, and froth dripping from his distended jaws.

"By heaven, comrade, bullets are wasted on that beast!" the young Chief of Regulators cried, desperately. "We must pick off the remaining ones."

Crack! crack! rung both rifles and pistols, and echo after echo rung over the prairie with weird result. And when the last bullets of the two men were spent, there were yet three of the angered brutes to contend with—three, and they were not thirty yards away. With brute's perseverance, they were bound not to give up till the last.

"Quick! your knife! It is our last resort!" Omaha Oil cried, drawing his own trusty blade, and bracing back preparatory against the onslaught. "Stand on your guard, and strike as you value life!"

El Gamin nodded. He, too, was on the guard, with his hunting-knife clenched between his teeth, and his hands free to clutch the enemy on approach.

On they came, side by side—the big leader, and two well matching him in size and strength. Three or four more leaps, and they would be upon the defenders.

A great yell of triumph arose from the throats of the outlaws, and they lashed their horses nearer, that they might watch the death-struggles.

For, though the loss of a herd of dogs was a heavy one, the ruffianly tastes of the outlaws were appeased by watching the suffering of an enemy—a sort of compensation for their loss.

"Ready, El Gamin?" Omaha asked, without turning his head. His black, magnetic eyes were riveted upon the big dog; he was trying to exert his powers of mesmerism over the brute. But to no avail. He could not catch the howling animal's eye.

"Ready!" El Gamin had just time to say; then came the onslaught.

With roars not unlike those of an infant lion, the

*Cross between bull-dog and bloodhound. Excellent herders, but ferocious and unmanageable, at times.

† Apache Indian name for large canines.

three dogs leaped upon the horses, as they lay prostrate, and then upon El Gamin and the young Regulator.

The largest one singled out Omaha, while his two companions attacked the gambler. But one soon withdrew, and putting his nose to the prairie, sprang away with a series of howls fearful to hear. He had struck upon the trail of Emily, the gambler's captive, who, becoming terrified, had crept away unnoticed by the two men.

"God help her!" Oil muttered, as at a glance he comprehended how matters stood. "Her life is in imminent jeopardy, and how can we aid her now?"

He turned and hurled off the savage brute from him with all his force, but on it came again, with eyes blazing and jaws distended.

Braced back and watchful, the Masked Terror received him, and deep his knife sunk into the back of the monster's neck. With almost a human shriek, the dog fell back, and bled out his life upon the moonlit plain. Omaha Oil then darted a glance at the gambler, and perceived that the dog was getting the worst of it.

"El Gamin is all right; ha! the other dog has found the girl. I must off to her rescue!"

And the next moment Omaha Oil had sprung upon his horse, the animal was upon its feet, and they were dashing away like the wind over the prairies.

So quick had been his action that he was some distance away ere the outlaws had sufficiently comprehended to start in pursuit.

"On, Clipper—on like the lightning flash!" cried Omaha, as he again heard piteous cries ahead of him, in which direction the girl had gone. "The brute will tear her to pieces ere I can reach her!"

The captive had run nearly a mile from the battleground, and by the time the young Regulator had reached her side, the ferocious *calvortie* had torn her so nearly up, that life had become extinct.

It was a frightful, ghastly sight, as viewed under the light of the pale moon, and a sensation of unutterable horror swept over Omaha as he beheld the terrible destruction. It was beyond even his nerves of steel.

And the dog not content with the havoc wrought, left the mangled corpse, and sprang fiercely at the throat of the Regulator's horse. But that sagacious animal had had its early training, and received it thoroughly, too, and craning forward its handsome neck, caught the yelping blood-hound by the back of the neck with its strong white teeth.

With a chuckle Omaha Oil came to Clipper's assistance, and dispatched the ferocious brute, and hurled it to the ground.

Then he glanced around him for the first time since his flight. The outlaws had divided into two parties; one of these was coming hotly on in pursuit of himself, and the other was after El Gamin, who had gotten rid of his canine foe, mounted his horse, and was scouring away, southward.

Those in pursuit of Omaha Oil were now within gun-shot, and he saw that they meant to bring him down, dead or alive. This resolved him as to his course.

With a last shuddering glance at the corpse of the girl, he headed Clipper north-west, toward Del Norte, and "tucked" on the spurs.

Then he threw himself alongside, like an Indian, and rode thus, which prevented his being shot by the outlaws. But soon a new calamity came.

There were loud rifle reports in his rear, and a bullet struck noble Clipper in the flank, plowing a deep wound. Instantly the poor animal began to go lame, and Omaha Oil saw with regret, that he must depend upon something else than horseflesh to extricate him from the pursuing danger.

Patting the limping horse kindly, he spurred him faster; then dropped off in the grass, and crept rapidly out of the track of the approaching horsemen.

But his action had been observed by the sharp-eyed members of the League, as was evidenced by a chorus of triumphant yells, and peering carefully above and over the tops of the tall wiry grass, he perceived that they were spreading out and surrounding him.

"Ha! curse them; they are bound to haul me in, if possible. Poor Clipper! had they not wounded him, I could have shook my heel at them. As it is, matters look rather dubious. Confound it, why didn't I think of this before. I believe the sound will carry!"

Lying upon his back in the grass he hastily detached from his belt a small silver bugle, artistically chased with gold mountings, and set with several flashing jewels.

It was a magnificent affair, which he, as Deadwood Dick, had once upon a time won from an old Jew pawnbroker, in Deadwood City.

Placing the tube to his lips, he blew a sharp, long-echoing blast, that rung far and wide over the plain.

In consternation the outlaws stopped, and listened to the quavering reverberations, while their leader swept the surrounding country with his powerful field-glass.

Soon he uttered a whoop of defiance, for away to the east he beheld a large band of Regulators loom up over the crest of a prairie billow, which was brightly bathed in yellow moonlight, and coming swooping down to the assistance of their leader.

Then like whipped curs the outlaws wheeled their horses and fled, for the Regulators greatly outnumbered them, and these brethren of the League had no desire to test the prowess of the followers of Omaha Oil.

If he was a sample, they did not care to encounter the rest.

Seeing his enemies retreating, Omaha arose to his feet, and sent a mocking yell after them; then turned and waited for his own men to come up, which they soon did, bringing wounded Clipper with them.

Careful examination was made, to which the noble animal patiently submitted, and Omaha was overjoyed to learn that his favorite steed was not seriously injured. Indeed, the animal seemed greatly relieved when the bullet was extracted, and once more ready for business.

"We heard you call, captain!" said Fawdon, the lieutenant in command, "and made haste this way, for we felt you were not the one to summon assistance unless it was absolutely necessary."

"You were abroad, then, lieutenant?"

"Yes. Went over to Del Norte, but found all quiet there. Not much attraction at the Palace, to-night!"

"Probably not. The Del Norteans are lying low, in waiting for the fat miners' train that comes into the valley, to-morrow. And, my hearties, it must be our duty to see that train safely through to Del Norte, for between here and there lies danger for them, that has death in it!"

"Halt!"

Clear and stern the challenge of the sentry rung out, and ominous rifle clicks were there to back the command.

It looked as if the little band of masked horsemen who had stopped at the edge of a little glade in the heart of a prairie motte, were not too welcome comers, at the darkest hour of the night before day dawn.

Thirty or forty there were of these statue-like, black-clothed, black-masked riders, mounted upon thoroughbred animals, and armed with weapons of superior worth.

Beyond whence came the sentry's challenge, in the lovely little hemlock fringed glade, a dozen wagons were corraled, and here and there were camp-fires burning low, and casting a faint flickering light upon the scene.

Up in the blue western heavens the pale listless moon hung as though feebly suspended in mid-air.

Around the camp-fires in the glade were stretched the forms of perhaps a dozen men; the women of the party were quartered within the canvas-covered "schooners," no doubt, for the nights were growing chill and frosty.

"Halt!" Clear and decisive the warning rung out, and the horsemen who were following the lead of the Masked Terror, drew instant rein. Judging from the speaker's tone of voice, he was no amateur at giving the order for the new-comer to halt.

"Halt it is!" Omaha Oil returned, grimly. "What'll you have?"

"We'll have you and your road-agents keep a proper distance, Mr. Deadwood Dick!" was the report. "You cannot play Black Hills games down here!"

The ex-road-agent leader of the Del Norte Regulators uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

What did this mean? Who was in the miners' caravan that had known him in the Black Hills? The voice was unfamiliar, and for the life of him, Deadwood Dick, or Omaha, could not tell who was the sentry.

"Who are you that knows aught of Deadwood Dick?" he demanded, after a moment's reflection.

"My name is Dore. Guess you do not know me; nevertheless I was in Deadwood during your notorious reign, and recognized you by your voice the moment you spoke. So, sir road-agent, you may as well go elsewhere for plunder, for you cannot have ours."

"Nor do we want it, sir sentry. You mistake our calling. I am Omaha Oil, and these are my men—two score in count. We are not road-agents, but Regulators, and having warning of your coming, we have come to offer you our services as protectors against the Prairie League, a band of merciless ruffian herders, who will attack you before you make Del Norte. Accept of us, fearlessly, and we promise you our assistance, for at the time we help you we are also furthering our own mission, by breaking up this infamous league of ruffian herders."

For several moments there was no reply, during which time the Avengers waited impatiently, for they had ridden hard, and needed rest, preparatory to what was in prospect for them.

Then the sentry again spoke.

"We accept of your story, sir; but are you not in truth Deadwood Dick?"

"I was in the Black Hills; here, I am Omaha Oil, the Masked Terror and Regulator."

"Then ride forward, sir, and we will trust you, for I never heard of Deadwood Dick going back upon his pledge or promise. Come into camp, and you will be welcome!" the sentry replied.

CHAPTER XII.

TWO ECCENTRICS IN A FIX.

"Gol darn ye!"

"Consarn yer sugar-coated mug!"

"I'll baste ye over ther mouth of I ever git loose!"

"An' ef I ever find out thet ye hit me, why, by ther immortal bone thet grew fast in ther larnix uv old Joner, I'll transmogrify ye inter a petrified clam. Once know'd a feller w'at got petrified, up in Colorado. He attempted ter steal up behind an' kiss a gal arter dark, an' kum ter found out et war his ugly stepmother. Great needle thet threaded Cleopatra! ther spontaneous shock generated thru his systematical constitoochin by thet constenatral discovery war so strained an' electric, thet he war subjected inter ther spasmodics, uv which he finally died, an' his petrified karkass war stud up over his grave fer a tombstun', memorial uv all his noble virtues and vices!"

The above conversation occurred between two men, who, out in mid-prairie, several miles from Del Norte, were rolling about upon the grass, in close

proximity to each other, and both of them securely bound, hand and foot.

No other signs of human presence were to be seen in the vicinity.

Which made their situation seem strange, and ludicrous.

The more so because of the appearance of the two unlucky individuals concerned.

One was that long, lanky, seven-foot, mysterious individual whom we noticed in the first part of this story, as the Arkansas Toothpick.

Like a great squirming human serpent looked he, as he lay outstretched, with his tremendous length of limb, and great hairy visage.

A strange being, with much about him that was odd and mysterious.

The other unfortunate was literally the dead returned to life, for no less a personage was he than the old Annihilator, whom many of the readers have doubtless supposed to be dead. Yes, Old Avalanche alive, but though exceedingly lively and himself again, he was not well of his wounds, received on that terrible night when the Harris home had fallen prey to the prairie flames.

How the old man escaped, shall be made known anon.

And these two odd sheep of the flock had no apparent love for each other, judging from the above conversation, given as they lay facing each other.

"Ye're ther gol-durndest sucker thet ary man ever see'd!" growled the Arkansas Toothpick, making a contemptuous face at his puny opposite—"actooally ther humbliest no-eared baboon I ever see'd!"

"An' ye're a beauty, you are!" Avalanche retorted, returning the inglorious grimace. "Ye're jest ther sweetest sugar-coated pill outside uv an apothecary's shop. Lord! it's a wonder ye don't attract more wimmen an' less flies. Beautiful! guess so. Ye're superyer ter a bunch o' sun-flowers an' peonies. Fact, by gracious. Wonder some eddicated an' interlectual an' scientific florist don't plant ye, an' let ye go to seed; tho' how he'd ever climb up to get at ther seed, aire a wuss mystery than perpetual moshun."

"Ba-a-ah!" mocked the other in contempt. "Ye puny little runt o' humanity; ef I ever war ter git my arms around ye, I'd flatten ye like a pancake griddle!"

"Oh! ye would, hey? Great notorious ham-bone thet did old Joner tantalize—ef I war ter clap my paw on ye, ye'd imagine another Hell-Gate hed bu'st-ed! ye'd sw'ar ye'd been struck w' ther butt-end uv a great, roarin' Norwegian avalanche o' annihilation. Ye'd think ye war encompassed w'in ther toils uv a great tumultuous whirlpool o' demolition—a devastatin' eppydemic o' ther boreal lattitudes and longtoads."

"Poo! hear the banty crow! Why, old ourang-outang, I ked decapitate ye so quick, ye wouldn't hear about it ontill sometime next year. Oh! but I'd like ter chaw off yer nose, or gouge yer eyes out!"

"Which delightful performance I'd love ter operate ont'er ye, ye long-legged, big-headed elephant. Gol-darn my pins, but I'd like ter step inter ther rosy-lipped sugar refinery o' yer'n, an' smash in them ivories, so they'd grow 'way out o' yer toes! Moses of bull-rush fame! I'd give my old jint, Flor'nce Night-in-a-gale, I do believe, jest fer a chance ter sock you a dab on ther proboscis!"

"An' I'd give all my future interests in Kingdom Come, ef I ked get my claws inter yer ugly face!" roared the Toothpick, making strong exertions to break his bonds. But, giant though he was, he could not burst them, which was vexatious in the greatest degree.

"Whoa! January; don't get a month ahead o' yerself!" chuckled Avalanche, watching the seven-footer's efforts. "Don't rend them bufler cords inter infinity, beloved hive of honey."

"Oh! go soak yer head, you baboon. Ef I can't bu'st 'em, you can't, an' we'll both rot here, together."

"Great arithmetical ham-bone, no! I ain't goin' ter make land-fertilizer plaster, yet, old long-legs, not muchly. I died, or putty nigh it, t'other day, an' expect ter make a positive flop, afore many years. But I'll be dasted ef thes old eppydemic aire goin' ter scatter his ashes w' any sich an' ornery long-legged, lantern-jawed hippopotamus as you."

"Might be glad o' ther honer uv sich a thing, old baboon!"

And thus the eccentric twain had it backward and forward, until both had exhausted epithets and accusations to hurl at each other, and could only lay and war with eyes instead of tongues.

Night was coming on, and when darkness set in, they were in imminent danger from the prowling wolves.

The way they had come in this unrelishable position, is easily explained.

Both were out upon the prairie, in companionship, when they had encountered a strolling band of Navajo Indians, who were abroad in search of sport and game.

They approached the two scouts, and in an unexpected moment took them prisoners, and after binding them left them on the grass, and went their way, rejoicing over their "much big" joke.

Then Toothpick avowed that it was the fact of Avalanche's having no ears that had caused the joke; and the Annihilator was positive that the Navajos had taken offense at them, because of the Arkansas man's ill proportions; from which word passed to word, until the twain were in reality mad and belligerent.

Avalanche knew little about Mr. Jem Murray, except that he was no slouch in a fight. They had accidentally met, and as their uncouthness, generally, was somewhat alike, they had roamed together.

Avalanche had an object and a mission to fulfill.

and so, evidently, had the "original" Toothpick. But what it was no one would ever learn, by waiting for enlightenment from him, personally.

He was uncommunicative in matters relating to his business in the San Luis valley; Avalanche more than once suspected him of being more than he appeared, but what? This was the question which even he could not answer.

Deadwood Dick he had neither seen nor heard from since the night of the massacre; nor even a suspicion that Omaha Oil, the dreaded Masked Terror, and Deadwood Dick were identical, ever entered the old Annihilator's head.

The question of how they were ever to get free, now, was not one of plain solution. Certain it was that neither of the prisoners had strength sufficient to burst their bonds, which left it impossible to escape, until they had some assistance.

"Well, my sugar-coated pill o' fizzle, w'at aire yer views on remainin' hayr all night?" Avalanche at last questioned, rolling over toward Mr. Jem Murray, the Toothpick. "Spect you needn't be nohow afraid o' wolves, fer they'd scorn ter whet their chins on sich an ornery galoot as you."

"See hayr, ye runt, aire ye not thru w' yer blarney?" was the reply. "Fer my part I feel more like chawin' ye up fer fodder, than talkin' so long about et. Jest roll over hayr, an' let me utilize ye ter sum good purpuss!"

"Wait til I get free, an' I'll come fer you like a rip-roarin' tornador o' terrificossity—like a three-gear meteor o' fizzardin' demoralation an' destructiveness, frum ther Aunt's Podes," Avalanche replied.

"Ye're a turned old hog!" from Toothpick.

"And, ye're a long-legged camel-giraffe, frum out o' civilization," assured Alva.

Then silence again reigned. But only for a few minutes.

Shrilly over the prairies, wafted on the wings of the evening breeze, came a strange sound—not the loving of a cow, the bleat of a sheep, nor the cry of a human, but the peculiar "ba-a-a" of a goat. Yes, there could be no mistake about this, and it caused Avalanche to struggle quickly up to a sitting posture.

"Hooray! Great carnivorous ham-bone that assaulted ther Adam's-apple ov old Joner!" he cried, triumphantly. "Et aire my right bower, Florence Night-in-a-gale, a-comin' ter my resky. Oh! ye on-gainly, honey-lipped statue, how d'ye like ther ydea o' parlin' w' this great devastatin' epydemic, now? Hayr, Florence! Hayr, Florence! Cum quick, ye dasted ornery beast, an' extricate yer master frum a consarned diffiklty."

"Ye needn't crow, old rooster!" growled Toothpick, grimly. "P'raps I kin hire yer pard ter sot me free, also!"

"Ho! ho! guess not. Wait till ye see my pard's genealogy, or whatever ye call it, an' ye'll observe a chap w'at ain't easily led aside frum ther path o' vartue an' religyyn, inter that o' sin an' contamination."

And Florence was soon forthcoming, but not alone, for the eccentric and wonderfully educated animal was dogging at the heels of a man, who, at a first glance, Avalanche could have sworn was Deadwood Dick.

But instead of Dick, it was El Gamin, the Gambler Prince.

"Hello! what's the matter heré? You fellows appear in somewhat of a dilemma!" he exclaimed, coming forward, while Florence sprang joyfully to her old master's side, and whisked her stubby tail in manifestation of her unprecedented pleasure. "Ha! by heaven! you, Jem Murray?"

"At yer service!" the Toothpick said. "Jem Murray, sheriff of Golden City, an' ther original Arkansas Toothpick."

A dark scowl covered El Gamin's face.

"So you have followed me, eh?" he muttered. "Well, I expected nothing else, under the circumstances. What do you want?"

"My daughter, and your life!" Murray answered, fiercely. "else I shedd'n't hev sought ye. Whar's the gal, first?"

El Gamin threw himself upon the grass, and for several moments stared hard at the ground.

"The poor child is dead!" he replied, at last, brushing a tear from his eye, at the approach of some painful memory. "She died a month after we left Golden City, of her old complaint, heart-disease, and I saw that she had proper interment."

The lanky sheriff groaned aloud.

"I expected that w'en I couldn't heer o' her bein' along w' yer!" he said, bitterly. "Durn ye, ef I ever git my claws onto yer weasand, ye'll think et's time ye squard' accounts on yearth."

"You shouldn't blame me, so much, as I was not all to blame!" the gambler replied. "You refused to sanction our marriage and happiness, and so we had to elope and take our chances. Had Blossom lived, we should ever have been happy together."

Murray softened a little at this.

"Mebbe you wasn't all cross-ways," he allowed, thoughtfully, "but, bein's I've chased ye so fur, I ken't let you alone w'out fightin' on the score. 'Twon't take long ter tell which is the best feller, an' that'll end it."

"We won't fight now!" El Gamin replied, hastily. "I have other work to do; and, by the way, it was only by this eccentric goat that I was attracted here. So I'll bid you good-evenin'."

And the gambler was about to turn away. But Avalanche made haste to call him back, for game yet was the veteran scout.

"I say, you chap, don't get inter such a perspiration, ter depart. Et has a bad reflection on yer physizical constitoochin, generally; asides, et's dangerous. Actooly know'd a man, onc'e, who worked in a

cluss b'lding, an' he got ter persperatin', and ther sweat generated steam, an' ther harder he worked ther more steam war made, ontel ther buildin' got so full that she bust'ed up, ontirely. Fact, accordin' ter ther new kind of a Testament. Tharfore, never git in a hurry when ye kin do a feller a good turn. Jest release me, an' as long as ther great devastatin' epydemic wafts like boreal fizzle thr'u' these lattitudes, he'll vote fer ye. Needn't mind about ther baby elerphant, hyar, w' honey-lipped sugar-refinery. He ain't no good on earth."

"Then ye ain't pards, eh?"

"Nary a time!" quickly objected the "original" Arkansas Toothpick, with a sniff of disdain. "Ye don't s'pose I'd sociate w' sich a humbly, ornery pizmy, do ye? I'd die sooner!"

El Gamin turned without a word and severed Avalanche's bonds; then strode rapidly away into the gloom that had densely thickened over the prairie. Whither he was bound was a secret to himself.

Avalanche arose to his feet with a triumphant chuckle, and approaching, bent over the reclining Toothpick, a broad grin upon his features.

"Good-by, my honey-lip—my gorgeous blooming peony—my fizzle an' sugar-coated pill—good-by. I hate ter leave yer, very much, as ther leaf sed ter ther tree, in autumn, but ther best o' friends must part. Hope yer won't catch ther distemper, layin' here, or thet ther wolves won't git ye!"

"Ba-a-a! ba-a-a!" Murray mocked.

"Very good, Jemmy, but old Flor'nce, heer, can beat it, you bet. Once she bl'atted so dasted hard thet President Grant heerd it 'way in Washington. Adieu! au revoir until we meet some other time."

And whistling to his goat, the eccentric Annihilator turned on his heel, and strode away over the prairie in the direction where lay Del Norte's twinkling lights.

He limped considerably yet from his wounds, and therefore his progress was necessarily somewhat slow.

Not ten minutes after the Annihilator had gone, Jem Murray coolly burst apart his bonds, and springing to his feet, hurried swiftly on in pursuit.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TRAIL PESTS.—TRUCE AND DEFIANCE.

THE sentry led the way forward into the glade, shouting for those in camp to awake, as he did so, and behind him Omaha Oil and his men followed on horseback.

And a wild-looking set of fellows they were, too, with their picturesque herder habits, slouch hats, and black masks, and the sleepy-headed miners regarded them with suspicion, until the man, Dore, assured them that all was right, and safe.

The men rekindled the camp-fires, and began to show a hospitable disposition, by setting forth food, and drink, while the females of the caravan peered distrustfully from the canvas-coverings of the long rakish schooners. Used as they were to rough life in the mines, they were none too eager to make the acquaintance of the almost world-notorious Deadwood Dick, who as road-agent, dare-devil and gallant, had no equal in the wide West.

While the miners were preparing food for them, Omaha and his men betook themselves to one side, and stretched themselves out for an hour's sleep of which all were in sore need. At the end of that time, they were awakened, and summoned to the repast, which, though humble, was most refreshingly tempting.

After the meal had been dispatched, Boss Breck, the commander-in-charge of the caravan, made his appearance, and was introduced to the Regulators and Omaha, their youthful commander.

With the "captain," as Breck was called, Omaha had a long, pleasant chat.

He found the man to be well-educated and intelligent, for all his rough miner's exterior, and dialect. As a miner, he was of course in favor with the favorite law of Judge Lynch; believed that no punishment was too good for outlawry and ruffianism, and hoped that the Government would take active measures to exterminate every tramp, communist, and ruffian on the face of the earth.

He was married and had a remarkably pretty daughter—a young maiden of seventeen summers, the very impersonation of health, and a gay vivacious little creature, whom no one could see without admiring.

Omaha received an introduction to her, but tried to avoid her as much as possible, for, when in the presence of females, his mind would go back to his life with Leone—to his happy prospects, and how bitterly they had been blighted—frostbitten in the very springtime of their youthful existence, and then he would become sullen and gloomy.

Ah! how that boy-man often wished for the old life they had lived, ere the first blow had been struck at their happiness, by the coming of Edith Stone.

He was a road-agent then, to be sure, and not only sinning against the laws of God and man, but running his neck into constant peril; still, those days at his "Castle" in the Black Hills were the happiest of his whole life—such an eventful life, too, since then.

Thoughts like these were running in his mind, as he sat in the edge of the glade, with his eyes upturned to the blue sky, where morning's light was just breaking—the heaven, where he felt sure Leone and his baby boy had long ere this found a glorious salvation, and an everlasting home.

He found solace in thinking that both were at peace up there. Sometimes he wondered if he were worthy of a place there, too. And in such moments bitter memories would chase away tender ones, and instead of grace his wild spirit yearned for vengeance.

Vengeance! ay, the craving came back this memory-bringing morning, with tenfold greater strength

than ever before, and it seemed to him he was given a giant's strength and courage to grapple with foes—to strike as he had never struck before.

The sun was rising beautifully in the cold, crisp west, and the air was gradually growing keener, when one of his men came to inform him that the caravan was ready to move.

So rising he accompanied the messenger back to camp.

Captain Breck had arranged everything preparatory for a start. Instead of riding in the wagons as they had done heretofore, the women were mounted upon the Regulators' horses, while Omaha and his men were to conceal themselves inside the schooners, where they were to remain until the attack of the Prairie League, when they could open up their concealed battery, with disastrous effect upon the foe.

Accordingly, with assignment to positions, the caravan left the motte and toiled along slowly over the prairie, toward its next destination. Del Norte lay some twenty-five miles in the distance, yet Breck had strong hopes of being able to push into the town by ten o'clock that evening.

As he expected no encounter with the ruffians until noon, or thereabouts, Omaha Oil did not confine himself or men wholly to the wagons, but they all took exercise in the open air.

Omaha rode ahead with Captain Breck and his daughter, and chatted with them.

In this way he learned that there was really a larger amount of golden treasure in the train than even the League had knowledge of; for since the death of Prairie Pistol's messenger, he was not certain if the League had been advised of the coming of the miners' train.

Breck had a large per cent. of the aggregate amount, and he was naturally anxious.

"Ye see, I shedd'n't keer ter lose it, seein's I've bin ten year in ther mines, and diggin' fer't," he said, seriously. "A feller don't know w'at ther value o' stuff is till he goes ter s'archin' and diggin' fer't; then he finds out, I tell ye. Never struck any big nuggets w'at made me rich in a day, like some fellers. Panned it all out, grain fer grain."

"And such as you I would hesitate the most to plunder, if I was in the road-agent line again," Omaha Oil replied. "During the period of my reign in the Black Hills, I always made it a practice to lay the most for them who mined their gold only to drink and gamble it away. I calculated I might as well have it as they, and also that I was in one sense doing good by keeping hell-fire from their lips. If we had less gold and less whisky, we would have more honest, sober men."

"Very truly spoken, sir. Whisky and money in the overplus, are the curses of our country to-day. Do away with the whisky, and make no more money, and you will see a satisfactory change in affairs. Ha! are not those our enemies, now?"

The miner pointed to where the head of horse and horseman were just disappearing from view behind a prairie swell, some two miles ahead. Not one man out of ten would have noticed the important fact, at such a distance.

"It is either the whole band there behind the hill, or else a spy posted to give warning of the coming of the train," Omaha replied, bringing his glass to bear, but without effect. "I will soon ascertain, however, for there to our right is a swell much higher than any other within the scope of two miles, and from there I can see, and signal you to proceed in the event of danger. For if the ruffians are there, we may as well keep right on, until they make the attack. This will disarm any suspicion they may have that you are prepared!"

So saying, the handsome young Regulator wheeled his horse and galloped back to the rear of the train; standing ready for instant duty were the miners, at the word of warning.

"Keep your weapons out of view, but have them where you can grab them in an instant, boys!" was the encouraging cry of the Masked Terror, for masked was the young avenger, and a grim-looking rider, whom no one could relish to meet as a foe.

Then, with a word of warning to his own men, he galloped swiftly away over the prairie toward the billow he had indicated to Captain Breck, which was the highest point in that vicinity for observation.

Eagerly those from the train watched the dashing, graceful equestrian, until he reached the summit; then all held their breath in suspense while he swept the eastward landscape with his clear eagle-eye.

They saw him look long and earnestly; then, as if by magic, both horse and rider became prostrated upon the ground, and were seen to be crawling off the summit.

"It means danger, fellers!" cried Boss Breck, wheeling and riding back along the train. "Stand ready ter execute my orders, at er minnit's notice!"

Omaha and his sagacious and well-trained animal soon crawled entirely off of the summit, and Omaha then rose to his feet and ran around in a circle; then pointed toward the halted caravan, which looked odd and picturesque, away down in the valley. The next minute he had ordered Clipper up, was upon his back, and dashing down the slope.

"Thet move tells us ter corral our wagons, an' prepare fer battle!" cried Breck, as he watched the young Regulator, anxiously. "See! here he comes, now, like a thunder-gust. To work, men! lively, now, and swing the wagons inter a circle. Unhitch ther mules, quicker'n ye ever did, afore!"

The commands were obeyed, with alacrity. The miners knew that they were working to save their gold, and also their lives, and they sprang to work with a will.

It was but the work of a few moments to swing the long white-covered schooners into a circle, and unhitch the draught-horses and mules and put them inside the circle. Within this space the miners and

their families were also taking refuge, when Omaha dashed up, his horse panting and flecked with foam, while he himself was pretty well blown.

"Good! It is lucky you comprehended my meaning, for the band of the Prairie League are so largely our superior in numbers, that it would be rash to attempt to ride through their midst. Ha! get ready, for there they come, now!"

He pointed to the eastward, where a large band of armed horsemen were just coming into view, over a prairie crest. There were at least three score and a half of them, well mounted, and at a glance, would have been pronounced reckless fighters, for their rough devil-may-care grace in the saddle, was admirable, and among the cattle herdsman of the far West you will inevitably find a pretty hard set of customers to handle.

"We've got work before us, I tell you!" Omaha declared, jumping Clipper over into the corral, and then proceeding from one wagon to another to give his men courage. "You've got to fight like sons-of-guns, or you'll get licked like blazes. So make every shot empty a saddle, and if the rascals get too close, use your revolvers, as you well know how. Don't give up while there's an ounce of blood in your bodies to shed in the defense of the train!"

Then, Omaha leaped over into the corral, where miners, and their families and the horses were all crowded in. Breck stood with rifle in hand, watching the approaching ruffian band, anxiously.

"You are too crowded in here!" Oil cried, taking in the situation at a glance. "Here!" and he raised up a wagon-tongue—"drive out my horses, and let them shift for themselves; I'll risk their going far!"

The Regulators' animals were accordingly all driven out, and the gap reclosed. This left more fighting room within the inclosure, and made it better, altogether.

In the meantime the outlaws were seen to be coming madly on, at the best speed of their wiry mustangs, and in their lead rode the *doire* man of Del Norte, Bill Monte, and the mysterious Prairie Patrol, whose connection with the outlaws made her a repulsive object, even though she was beautiful in face and form.

That Wild Bill Monte was commander-in-chief of the League, Omaha had not a doubt, now, and resolved was the young leader of the Regulators to destroy both the League and its chief.

Just out of gunshot the outlaw-herders came to a halt, while Wild Bill and Prairie Patrol rode forward, with white rags held aloft on the muzzles of their rifles, for a truce.

"Shall we let them approach?" asked Boss Breck, turning to the Masked Terror.

"Not close enough to learn anything!" Oil replied, leaping upon Clipper's back. "I'll go out and hear their say."

And laying his trusty Evans's rifle across his saddle-bow, the daring ex-road-agent rode fearlessly forth upon the prairie, unaccompanied, and evidently careless as to the consequences.

He hastened his horse, however, for he cared not to have the two truce-bearers approach near enough to discover the slitted canvas sides of the "schooners," lest they suspect the presence of a concealed battery.

Wild Bill nodded, and drew rein as Omaha approached, then spoke:

"Are you in charge of yonder train, young feller?" he demanded, gruffly.

"At present, I am. Why do you ask, sir gambler and robber?" the Masked Terror answered.

"Because, I wanted ter see the general in command!" the outlaw said, with a chuckle, as he thought, no doubt, of the easy victory in store for him.

"We're the Prairie League o' ther San Luis valley, as ye've doubtless heard of, an' we demand an unconditional surrender of yer train, as toll fer passage over our exclusive route!"

"Humph! is *this* all you come out here to say?" sneered Omaha, in contempt. "If it is you may as well paddle right along back, for we'll not surrender no more'n we'll cut our heads off."

"But, hold! You hain't no ideo o' how we'll slaughter ye, an' git the gold besides, if ye don't cave!" Monte protested. "We're five dozen ten, ter one dozen o' you, an' et'll take about ten minnits fer us ter wipe every mother's son of ye out o' existence."

"All right! Go ahead and wipe as much as you please. We're ready to receive you with open arms!" retorted the Regulator, wheeling his animal and galloping back toward camp.

Monte cursed furiously, and he and Prairie Patrol rode back to the outlaws' lines, where a short consultation was held. Evidently they were a little suspicious; but soon it was apparent that their greed for gold had overmastered their fears, for with loud cries, they spurred their horses on to do the opening charge.

A battle was now a certainty!

CHAPTER XIV.

GREEK MEETS GREEK.—LURKING DANGER.

ON came the enemy at full tilt, presenting rather an imposing aspect.

Omaha Oil had resumed his position within the corral, and stood among the miners, cheering them with words and example. Nearer and nearer came the ruffian herders, until they were within easy gunshot; then, at a blare from Omaha's silver trumpet, the miners, twelve in number, opened up with a deadly volley that emptied as many saddles as shots were fired.

But, evidently such a defense the outlaws had apprehended, for they renewed their cries of triumph, and urged their mustangs harder, while they poured in a rattling volley upon the train. This did more

harm to the Regulators in the wagons, than to the miners behind them, for several of the former were wounded more or less severely.

But enough out of their two-score was left to retaliate with a deadly fusillade, which, to the utter consternation of the herders, swept full half of their front men away, and utter confusion reigned.

Among those who fell was Wild Bill Monte, and seeing him go down, Prairie Patrol quickly galloped to the front, and in Spanish rallied the men about her, and they came on with drawn revolvers. Seeing which Omaha gave the ringing order:

"Revolvers all! Courage, comrades; there are only thirty more!"

Revolvers were drawn, and the moment range was gained, a volley from either side tore like electric hail through the air, doing some damage to the miners, and emptying several more of the outlaws' saddles.

Seeing which they whirled about and beat a precipitate retreat, for the distance of half a mile, when they halted and dismounted, evidently for a rest.

"Very well done!" commented Omaha, as Captain Breck advanced with beaming face and extended hand.

"I apprehended more loss on our side. How many are wounded of our party, lieutenant?" addressing the Regulator who had just completed an examination of the wagons.

"Only two seriously, and six slightly, captain," was the reply. "None of the lot are unable to ride!"

"Good! then we'll take leave of the train, presently, if yonder roughts clear out, which I believe is their intention."

"I find that our loss has not been as severe as yours," said Breck. "Altogether, it has been what I call a lucky termination of a battle against odds. You don't think they'll attack us again then, young man?"

"I can better answer that question after awhile!" Omaha replied, grimly. "Never put any fixed construction upon what are the intentions of a villain, and you'll avoid disappointment. Two-thirds of those unhorsed men are but slightly wounded, and will be ready for work inside of a week."

"Then why not make a charge and wipe 'em out, fer good?"

"No! I will not strike a man when he is down. Only ruffians and savages do that. Let them go; we will finish this job soon. Hitch up your horses and get the train in motion. Lieutenant, you may catch our horses, and we will ride on to Del Norte with the train. I think we have little to fear from yon human coyotes, 'twixt here and there!"

Accordingly the miners set to work and geared the draught horses to the wagons, Omaha Oil's horses were caught, and in half an hour the caravan was again toiling away over the dun prairie.

At a safe distance the League, in its depletion of numbers followed. Perhaps a score of the disabled outlaws had been remounted, and sent off southward by east, to their stronghold.

Wild Bill Monte was with the party who were following the train, he and Prairie Patrol riding in advance.

The ruffian had been only slightly stunned by the bullet, and was now among the fiercest of those who pursued the miners' caravan, their object being to obtain booty and revenge.

Omaha Oil and a division of his Regulators rode in advance of the train, while another division brought up the rear. And thus, making a peculiarly picturesque spectacle, they all moved along through the cold December's afternoon sunlight.

As he wished to make Del Norte before camping for the night, Captain Breck had the train push steadily on and as rapidly as the nature of the route would admit.

The following outlaws kept on about the same distance, making no attempt at further molestation—indeed, it would have been foolhardiness to have made an attack where there were now more of those with the train, than of the League, who were in fighting trim.

"Wish I had a gud howitzer!" Breck said, riding ahead and joining Omaha, "an' I'd soon scatter them doggin' devils in promiseous shape. Once served wi' light artillery in the war, an' hev an' idea I ken spile a few o' them lunkies, 'andsom. What do you suppose they're followin' us for?"

"Don't know, unless they've another recruit of pards in Del Norte, and intend to attack you again. Del Norte you know, has very few respected laws or law-makers, and though there is probably a few honest souls in the place, the evil element greatly overbalances the good. Consequently a lawless state of affairs exists, as would be natural in any place where the population is controlled by ruffians."

"Then you consider it unsafe to enter the town?" Breck demanded, in alarm and anxiety.

"No, not exactly. Not that the inhabitants as a general are too good to hesitate at the commission of any crime, but I do not think molestation would be given your train, except by the outlaws, for the simple reason that the Del Norteans stand in awe of threatened invasion from the government militia to suppress the high-handed gambling and whisky distilling which is going on there."

"Then Del Norte has illicit distilleries, eh?"

"So I understand. But that is nothing. Comparatively few of the Western towns of note that do not have these in secret operation—some of them boldly."

Thus they conversed, while the afternoon wore away. At sunset Del Norte lay in sight, in the distance, but it was yet nine or ten miles away, and there were no roads on which the wagons could be drawn rapidly, which made it promise to be well to wait midnight ere they reached the town.

Leaving affairs at the train in charge of his lieutenant, Omaha Oil started on ahead at a sharp gallop. It was his purpose to visit Del Norte, and see how the land lay, then ride back and report. He was not impressed with these Del Norteans in a favorable light, and he had more apprehensions of danger at the town than he had betrayed to Captain Breck. At full speed he dashed along over the prairie, through the dying sunlight, his thoughts scarcely reverting to the nature of his errand, for in such moments as these only one person occupied his thoughts, and that person—Leone.

"Leone! Ah! what would he not have given to have her back again, as in the old days when they were so happy? But she was in heaven, now, with her little baby boy; both were certainly better off than though living here below on the sinful earth."

On—on, he galloped, and at last entered Del Norte, unmasked, for thus he was not recognized as Omaha Oil, the Masked Terror.

First of all he went to the gambling den known as the Oriental Palace. Here he found a strange desertion, only a few of the habitués being present, and these were strolling idly about. No playing was going on, and the place had a deserted and uninviting appearance.

To avoid suspicion, the young Regulator sauntered through the great apartment; and finally he invited the gamekeeper to start up the keno game, which was done with alacrity, for business never had been more slack.

Accordingly several bouts were played, Omaha, with his habitual luck, winning every time. Then, when tired of the sport, he arose and sauntered out of the building, a perplexed expression upon his face.

"I am puzzled!" he muttered, when he was alone. "The Palace is strangely deserted, and I can put no other construction on the fact than that these absent gamblers are laying for the approaching miners' train. Confound it, I wish I knew what to do."

Springing into the saddle, he galloped to the western side of the town, looking off toward the caravan. It was now out of sight, probably hidden in the depth of a prairie wave.

"I see no other way than to let them come up. Better to fight it out here in town than to take the chances of an open prairie attack, in Stygian darkness;" for the sky was now overcast with somber clouds, and the night promised to be one of intense blackness. "I wish I had the counsel of Old Avalanche, just about now. His old head had an overstock of ingenuity in it, and I think he could see the way through."

"Great ham-bone thet exorcised ther hog-goblin' uv old Joner! Moses who became famuss fer his bull-rushin' proclivities!" exclaimed a familiar voice, close at hand; "ef all ye want aie Avalanche—the great devastatin' disease o' ther peraries—why heer is thet awesum ruffle uv a hurricane, an' j'int, and all."

And from the bushes, close at hand, emerged the veteran Annihilator, sure enough! followed by his eccentric companion, the goat. Omaha Oil started, violently, and his face assumed an incredulous expression as he beheld the old scout.

"You! Avalanche!" he exclaimed—"you, alive? I thought you dead."

"Yas, I calklate so; but all ther same—ther old contagious eppydemic ain't gone over the dam, yet. Ham-bone thet sanctified Joner, no!"

"But how, in the name of all that is wonderful, does it come that you are alive?" Omaha demanded, with increasing amazement. "When I left you, to go in search of tools with which to dig your grave, I believed you gone—quite dead. When I returned, some one or something had removed your body and that of my child."

"Yas; et war the Perarer Patrol, or whatever-ye-call-her. She tuk us ter ther ruined haciender in ther Black Woods, an' berry'd ther babe, wile she nursed me back ter life. Dunno why; she never even spoke ter me, ter 'splain which ner t'other. Arter I war well enuff ter shift fer myself, she show'd me the door, and sed 'git; an' I got, in ginnywine style, bet yer gud life on that."

"Then my child was really dead, too, eh?"

"Oh! yes; poor little cherubin got salivated wi' ther same bullet thet kerried off Mrs. Leone. Poor souls!"

Omaha Oil made no reply. His eyes were riveted upon the ground; a dark, revengeful light shone from them, and flickeringly illuminated his dusky countenance.

For several moments he remained in silence; then he related his experience since the night of the massacre, including his late defense of the miners' caravan, against the attack of the ruffian herders, and his present mission to Del Norte.

"Yas, I argue ye'll hev troublous times ter git thet kerryvan thru, ef they've got much gold aboard. Ham-bone thet petrified old Joner! Why these fellers'd run sixteen miles er minnit, now, ter git a smoll o' ther ginnywine ariferous."

"Well, if there is to be more battle, here's what is going to take a hand in it!" Omaha said, grimly. "My mood is all right for battle, and so I shall go in."

"An' thes great destructive comet o' contagion, too. Moses o' ther bull-rush notoriety! Wait till ther great Annihilation gits ter runnin', nicely, an' ye'll see fun—haydoodles uv et, I tell ye. Ther's old Prudence absent, ter be sure, but wi' two sich consolidated eppydemics as Florence Night-in-a-gale an' myself, I'll be durned ef things ain't a-goin' ter smoke!"

"Can I depend upon you to assist me in getting this train safely through beyond Del Norte? After that they will not need our protection."

"Yas, Dickey, my posey, ye can, ter ther end, as

ther musketeer sed ter ther new hotel boarder—as old Florence Night-in-a-gale sed ter a Yankton judge, when she give him a whack wi' her he'd-gear."

"Very well. You remain here, and keep a watch upon the town, while I ride back to the train, and report. Look out for us toward midnight, and let us know if there are any hostile demonstrations."

Saying which Omaha galloped back to the train which by this time had gained a couple of miles in their slow travel, rendered doubly slow by the darkness, and by caution necessary.

"Well, what are the prospects?" demanded Breck, as the Regulator rode up, after a swift ride from the valley town.

"Doubtful!" Omaha replied, briefly. "Be prepared to fight, anyhow. Are the outlaws still dogging?"

"Yes. They are not far behind; only the darkness hides them from view."

"Well, then, we may expect more unpleasant work, before the night is through!" was the reply, as the young Regulator rode on to join his men at the rear of the train.

And the caravan toiled on, until Del Norte lay just in front—gloomy and silent.

CHAPTER XV.

THE GAMBLER'S TRAIL OF BLOOD.

At this same hour of the caravan's approach to Del Norte, something was occurring at the homestead of the Harringtons, worthy of mention, and though the characters are merely incidental to the story, whose basis is the strange life-history of Deadwood Dick, we will here narrate them.

In the grand old Spanish parlor of the hacienda, three persons were gathered. Two were men; the third pretty Ella Harrington. She was neatly attired, and clutched in one hand a Spanish guitar, on which she had evidently just been playing. All three were in a standing attitude; the two, El Gamin and Ella, had evidently just arisen upon the entrance of the third party, who was no other than the ex-Government Spy, Canning Cass Cameron, who stood with hat in hand, near the door.

There was an evil expression upon the Spy's face, as he stood and gazed at the two lovers—for such the two were—and a glitter in his bold, black eyes which meant a menace.

El Gamin flushed a trifle, and the lady of his choice trembled violently.

"Well!" Cameron said, at last, dwelling slightly interrogatively upon the opening word, "this looks mutually interesting, doesn't it? How long had your billing and cooing been going on? Pray, Miss Harrington, be seated, and do not let me interrupt your singing."

And laying his hat upon a stand, Cameron betook himself to a seat, upon an ottoman. Ella sunk back upon a sofa; El Gamin still remained standing, his gaze turned fiercely upon the Government Spy.

"Sit down; do not tire yourself, in addition to making yourself ridiculous!" Cameron said, with a mocking smile. "You remind me of Booth's Hamlet, where he beholds the ghost."

El Gamin took a step nearer.

"Leave the room!" he commanded, hoarsely, pointing toward the door. "Leave! Go!"

"Oh! no, not yet, my beloved friend. I have not interviewed my sweet lady friend, here, yet. If your presence is obnoxious you may step out!"

"Curse you!" El Gamin cried; "why do you come here? Go, I say! You lady is my betrothed wife. You have no claim upon her. Go, or I will cut your black heart out, and give it to the dogs!"

"Oh! is that so? You are getting belligerent, eh? Don't sling my poor heart at the dogs, for I want the cats to have it." Evidently the Spy was using his best efforts to madden the Prince of Gamblers.

El Gamin did not reply, but drew from his belt a pair of pistols, one of which he handed to Cameron. "Oh! don't fight! don't fight! you will be killed!" screamed Ella, rushing in between them, frantically.

"Get out of the way!" El Gamin cried, fiercely. "We'll settle this affair in blood."

"Hold! give the girl a chance to say which she loves best!" cried Cameron. "The other will withdraw."

Involuntarily the eyes of the two men turned upon Ella Harrington.

"Choose!" El Gamin said, hoarsely.

"I choose Mr. Redwood!" was the girl's reply, as she advanced toward the Spy. "I thought I cared for you, but I like him better!"

"But you shall not have him, you deceitful cat!" the Spaniard hissed, his face flaming redly. "You have trifled with my affection; you might better have played with a tiger! Stand ready, sir rival. You can only have the senora if you win her by my death!"

Cameron saw that the Gambler Prince was deeply in earnest; and a maddened Spaniard is perhaps the fiercest of furious men.

So the Spy nodded, and examined his revolver. He found it all right, and then faced the gambler.

"One! two! three!" El Gamin counted, and then fired, as did Cameron, instantly. Both bullets pierced fleshy parts of the contestants' bodies, causing painful but not dangerous wounds.

Again the pistols came to a level, and a flash and sharp double report echoed through the room. This time Cameron dropped upon one knee, but did not give utterance to a sound, as for the third time the pistols came to bear.

Bang! again the weapons of death rung out their spiteful warning, and while the infuriated gambler darted back at the sting of an unerring bullet, poor Cameron sunk back upon the floor, lifeless.

A shriek of terror burst from the lips of Ella Harrington, as she saw the Spy fall, and saw El Gamin

turn upon her, with a glare of demoniac joy in his eyes.

"Keep back, monster!" she gasped, retreating toward the door.

"Ha! ha! I have you now, and you shall be mine, willingly or unwillingly, you *cabrese*.* What! do you mean to battle for your rights?" for Ella Harrington had seized two rapiers from a rack, and flinging one to the gambler, stood with the other in her grasp, her face white but resolute, and her bearing admirable.

"Yes, if you are not a coward you will give me a chance for my liberty, you ruffian!" she cried, sternly.

El Gamin seized the blade with a vile curse. "I'll cut your head from your body!" he growled, savagely. "Instead of a fawn, you seem to be a young tigress!"

He made a lunge and a thrust, which were dextrously parried; then the young woman gave him a terrible rap by the side of the head, which caused him to reel back dizzily. But he recovered his equilibrium in an instant, and again rushed forward. This time his thrust was not rightly parried, and as a consequence Ella received a cut in the left thigh which laid open the flesh an inch deep.

With a cry she retreated a few steps, but the Spaniard followed her, perseveringly, a wild, terrible light in his eyes.

"You ruffian!" she gasped.

"You she wretch!" he taunted.

Then he made another deadly thrust, which with the skill of an experienced swordsman she parried, and laid his left arm bare to the bone.

With a howl of mingled pain and rage, he came on once more, like an infuriated bull of the arena leaps at the tormenting matador.

He made a thrust, and she attempted to parry, but he caught her blade at a fault with his own, and hurled it from her grasp. The next instant his own blade was buried to the hilt through her heart, and she fell back to the floor, dead!

Withdrawing his sword, the wretch staggered back agast at his sickening crime; but with an iron will he the next moment mastered himself, and a low chuckling laugh escaped him.

"She thought to take me at a disadvantage with this blade, and kill me to avenge you Government Spy!" he muttered, wiping away the perspiration from his brow; "but I was too much for her, though it is ten years since last I fought with a sword. Then my father was at the end of my blade, and fell. Ha! *el diablo*!"

He leaped back in surprise, as a young man, stalwart and athletic, leaped into the room, and snatched up the blade that the El Gamin had hurled from poor Ella's grasp.

It was Philip Harrington, the younger of the two brothers, who had witnessed the last of the conflict, through an open casement, and had hastened to his sister's relief, only to arrive too late.

"Villain! hell-bound!" he cried, rushing at the blood-blinded gambler, and making a fierce thrust. But, too-headed, and unmindful, he reckoned without his host, for El Gamin threw himself instantly upon guard.

Then began a hot, furious contest, of thrusting, parrying, and feinting.

El Gamin was an expert, and it took but a moment to prove that Philip Harrington had had thorough education in sword exercise.

Both men were of prodigious muscular strength, and consequently, it was but natural that the contest should be an equal one.

But, it could not last forever. Both men fought, imbued with potent fury. Steel clashed against steel, and the breath of the two combatants came in gasps.

"Quarter!" at last articulated Philip Harrington, reeling back against the wall, and bleeding from half a dozen wounds—"enough!"

"Oh! no; you need a little more!" the victorious gambler cried, rushing on. "Only your life will pay the forfeit for the good blood I have lost."

He made a thrust, fiercely, when Harrington was too weak to parry it, and ran the young farmer straight through the heart.

Then the Prince of Del Norte's gamblers turned and fled from the hacienda, out upon the prairie.

He cared not to participate in another contest right away, until he had time to collect strength, for he had not escaped without severe wounds, from which he had lost enough blood to weaken him.

"Curses!" he muttered as he moved along toward Del Norte, over the intensely dark prairie—"I am a murderer, now, and yet I could not help it. I could not have let that Spy lived to possess the senora; she and her brother placed their lives at my disposal. Ugh! bad work, but there is yet some satisfaction, for now I am heart free again—all are enemies; I have not a friend on earth, that I know of."

These were the mutterings of the criminal, as he sped along, as fast as his weakened limbs would carry him.

Del Norte lay only a short distance away; here he had found a retreat wherein he could hide, and recuperate. But he was destined not to escape so easily.

Upon the prairie the darkness was perfectly intense—in such a degree that the line-pole lights off on the herding plains were invisible, and those from Del Norte were faintly perceptible, but not plain.

A horseman was riding over the prairie, singing in a rude, boisterous voice, a rollicking mountaineer's song. As he came closely after the gambler, El

* Devil.

Gamin muttered a curse, and dropped flat in the grass.

The horseman drew rein, and the gambler heard him dismount.

"Whoa-r-r, Judith, ye onmannerly beast, till I investigate that noise I heard. Durn my old sow's last litter o' pigs, but I'm sure I see sumthin' move, just ahead. An' who sez ther great notorious Toothpick ain't a goin' ter look ter these night-prowlers, w'at endanger ther safety o' a man's constytuchin', w'en he's travlin'. Hello, thar! whar are ye, ye ornery cuss? Better scratch up out'en the grass, I'm tellin' ye, fer ef ther great original Jem Murray, from Arkansas, should put one o' his number twenty-seven hoofs onter ye, ye'd think an elephant trod on ye."

Then the eccentric and mysterious long-geared individual from Arkansas began thrashing about in the grass, while he whistled a lively border-dance tune.

"Yes, ye'd better roll out, ye sneak!" he continued, after a few moments of diligent search, "or I'll set ther prary afire, and thet'll raise ye, unless ye kin crawl inter a ground-mice's hole. Lord, I'll lam-baste ye, if ever I git my carnivorous talons on ye. Know ye're in the grass, thar, sum'ars, an' by ther great jumpin' John Rogers, I'll find ye if et takes till ther bu'st o' doom. Kent foolish wi' a small-sized volcaner, like me, I tell ye."

Nearer and nearer came the Toothpick to where El Gamin was standing; the gambler had risen to his feet with drawn revolver.

"Halt!" he cried, at last, when the Arkansas man was only a few feet away, which fact he guessed by the sounds of his footsteps, for as yet the gloom was too deep for penetration. "Don't come a step further, or I'll blow the top of your head off."

"Oh! ye will, will ye?" came back the answer, and evidently Toothpick had come to a halt. "Ye'll blow ther 'hole top o' my head off, will ye? I wish I ked cum an' hug ye oncer, fer ter show my appreshiation uv yer philanthropic offer, ye black plum. If ye want ter kiss ther paw uv an Amerikan Vessuvius, just cum up an' let me gaze onter ye. I'm Jem Murray, ther great Toothpick o' Arkansas—an absolute terror ter ther hoss-thieves an' moonshiners uv thet gelorious State. Shute, ye Babalonian! shute!"

And the next moment a great bulky body came shooting meteor-like through the air, and El Gamin could not leap aside quick enough to avoid being struck, and knocked to the ground. The next moment the two men had clinched in a desperate battle-hug, for the Toothpick had now recognized his bitterest foe in the gambler, and he bent all his energies in the attempt to crush the life out of his adversary.

But it was a vain attempt. El Gamin seemed literally boneless—he squirmed about; over and over rolled the two men, without a word, but their gleaming eyes expressing the rancor in their bosoms, toward each other.

El Gamin was nearly equal in strength to the Toothpick, despite the latter's giant proportions, and he worked like a beaver for the victory. Over and over, strain, twist, jerk they went, and at last the gambler broke loose. Then with the quickness of a lightning-flash—with that swift dexterity peculiar to a Spaniard, the villain whipped a knife from his belt, and plunged it once! twice! thrice into the giant's breast. Murray sunk back, without a groan, and the twice-double murderer sprung to his feet with a wild cry.

"Victory again! Furies, I believe I am growing mad for blood!" and he laughed demoniacally.

On toward Del Norte he sped, his hat off, his long hair waving in the breeze, his appearance truly more that of a madman than a sane person. On—he rushed, straight into the town, yelling and brandishing his gleaming knife.

He wanted a victim.

And that victim was lacking.

CHAPTER XVI.

SOMETHING NOT EXPECTED.—CONCLUSION.

A DEATHLIKE stillness reigned over the town, as the caravan entered the prairie main street, on which were the few saloons and stores. Not a soul was seen abroad in the streets, and all was dark and apparently lifeless.

"Look sharp! watch on every side, for you are perhaps between two fires of death!" Omaha Oil cried along the line. "Guns ready! hearts brave! fire not until you are fired upon!"

"Listen! By heaven! we are lost!" cried Boss Breck, excitedly. "See! militia! They are in front, in the rear, and all around us!"

It was even so! A company of soldiery, with rattling bayonets, were charging down the street toward them; a company of mounted cavalry was bringing up the rear; while out of houses along the street issued more armed blue-coats, with triumphant cries.

The train came to a halt, at Omaha Oil's peremptory order, and both miners and Regulators grasped their guns; but this was useless, of course, for the militia outnumbered them three or four to one.

"In God's name, what does this mean?" demanded Breck, in great excitement. "Why are we thus stopped by the soldiers, and in this place?"

"We have yet that to learn!" Omaha Oil replied. "There is a screw loose, somewhere, and if we remain silent, I have no doubt we shall soon learn the reason."

Silence was accordingly enjoined throughout the train—all, as it were, were waiting to hear their sentence pronounced.

The soldiers all came to a standstill, with "ordered arms," at a stern ringing command, while the

cavalry also drew rein. Then the same commanding voice was heard, again:

"Hello! there; train ahoy!"

"Well, what's wanted?" demanded Breck, from his position on one of the wagons. "Why in thunder do you thus stop an honest miners' caravan?"

"By that power vested in us by the Government to apprehend and arrest all those engaged in the production and transportation of illicit whisky!" was the ringing response. "You have forty barrels of untaxed whisky in your so-called 'honest miners' train', and we command you to surrender, or take the consequences of a charge. Also, we want the young desperado you are harboring, with the delusion that he is a Regulator, he having allied himself with a band of roughs of that order. His name is *Omaha Oil, alias Deadwood Dick!*"

As may well be imagined, these words caused a sensation among those in the train. An exclamation of hearty indignation escaped the miners, at the suspicion of their being smugglers of illicit whisky. And the Regulators uttered a growl, as the words against their leader issued from the officer's lips.

"Your charge is insultin', you durned blue-coated loafer!" shouted Breck, from the wagon-top, "and if I had you here, I'd durned soon break your head. That's not half the whisky in this train than is in yer big gullet, an' I'll give a thousan' in pure dust if you'll find a gallon o' juice about our traps."

"What? Is it possible that you deny having illicit liquors in your wagons, sir?" shouted the officer. "Can we have made so great a mistake?"

"Reckon ye hev, fer sure," returned Breck. "Leastwise, ye won't find no juice in this kerryvan. We're goin' ter camp fer a couple o' days, hayr in town, an' ef ye'll wait till daylight, ye can examine our wagons."

"From where do you hail, sir miner?"

"From Danbury Split, in the Rockies, ef it's any o' your bizness. Be'n'thar now, nigh six year."

"Well, there is something strange here, indeed!" said the officer, leaving his command, and riding close to the train. "My name is Fullerton, and it is my business to look to this whisky business. I received warning to meet a smuggling train here, to-night, and thus, if we have made a mistake, you see how it is. But we know that Deadwood Dick is with you, and we demand his surrender. His Regulators we do not want. They have, in reality, done the San Luis valley a service by warring against the Prairie League, and also praise is due to Deadwood Dick for his evident reformation. But his work up at Deadwood was too criminal to allow of his going about a free man, and it is our duty as soldiers to arrest him, according to law!"

"I've nothin' ter say about that!" Boss Breck replied, "only that he saved our lives an' money, an' ef he wants muscle an' backbone ter defend himself with, we'd be brutes not ter stick by him. Ye'd better clear out an' let ther young feller alone, ossifer, fer he'll make ye trouble afore you git him!"

"No! he'll make no trouble!" was Omaha Oil's response, in a clear, ringing voice. "I'll not imperil the rest of you by resistance, but will surrender! Come forward, sir officer, if you want me!"

"Don't surrender! We'll stand by you with our lives!" cried both miners and Regulators, in a voice. "You'll only be strung up if you surrender!"

"Let 'em string!" was the reckless reply. "I've nothing to live for. My wife and child have both been innocently murdered, and there is nothing to make life desirable. If I regret anything, it is that I shall be unable to assist in the extermination of the ruffians of the Prairie League!"

Colonel Fullerton now rode up, accompanied by half a dozen dismounted privates, and, true to his promise, Omaha delivered himself, and was handcuffed. Then, after bidding adieu to the Regulators and miners, he was marched away to the camp of the military, which was pitched on the prairie, south of the town. The soldiers followed, and so did the caravan, the miners going into camp not far from that of the military, for not one was there among the miners or Regulators who was less than interested in the welfare of Deadwood Dick.

To them he had endeared himself by his gentlemanly bearing, courage and skill; that he must die seemed a shame—an outrage.

And they meant to be with him at the last.

Omaha was thrown into a tent by himself, and left alone; but a cordon of guards were set around his prison, without, for Colonel Fullerton was bound that the dare-devil of the Black Hills should not escape him, as he had many times escaped his captors in the past.

Dick was not down-hearted, but took things coolly. He sat in his prison, now, whistling a song that had been a favorite with Leone, and reflecting upon what was to come.

In the morning, he calculated, a court-martial trial would be given him, and he would be convicted, and shot.

He thought of Avalanche, and wondered where the old scout was keeping himself. Surely if he were in Del Norte, he must have been attracted by the confusion, and learned of his capture.

For a couple of hours Dick lay thus, his mind busied with the past and present; then he dropped off into a sound sleep, for he was much fatigued. When he awoke it was with a start.

A cold hand had touched his face, and aroused him. Who could it be? Within the tent all was Stygian darkness. Outside was heard the monotonous tramp of the sentinels.

"Sh!" cautioned a voice, in a shrill whisper; "make no noise. I am a friend, come to save you. I am El Gamin."

"Why have you come here?" Dick demanded, raising himself to a sitting posture. "I do not want to escape. Your effort is useless!"

"What! do you mean to say you do not care for life and liberty? that you will refuse to escape from certain death, when I have periled my life in your behalf?" the Spaniard demanded, in astonishment.

"Ay! I mean just that!" was the firm reply of the prisoner. "I want to die. I am weary of this hunted life. For the last two years I have been an out-cast upon the face of the earth. I have no home, now, nor friends here upon earth, and I do not care to stay. Up in the keeping of God I have a darling wife and child, and I hope for a place with them, if I can die now!"

El Gamin was strangely affected. He sat beside the prisoner, buried in deep thought.

"I wish that I might hope for a place up there with you!" he replied, "but I am too irretrievably bad. Then you won't accept of liberty?"

"No, thanking you all the same."

"Well, then, good-by. I admired you and that is why I ventured here. If die you will be brave, and remember that, base wretch and murderer though he is, you have a friend in El Gamin."

Then the gambler glided away, and that was the last Deadwood Dick ever saw of him.

Without difficulty El Gamin managed to escape from the prison-tent, and wended his way along over the prairie. His head was bowed, and he was reflecting upon the odd determination of Deadwood Dick. It certainly was a most eccentric freak.

For half an hour he wandered along; then suddenly, ere he had any warning of danger, he was fiercely attacked by a half-dozen burly herders, whose only weapons were knives.

The first faint tinges of dawn streaking the east, gave the gambler an idea who they were, for a short distance away Prairie Patrol sat upon her white horse, urging on her "tools."

Leaping back with the agility of a panther, El Gamin drew his revolvers, and fired. Down went two of his assailants at first fire. Again he fired; one fell; the other unerring bullet sped along and pierced the breast of the mysterious Prairie Patrol. With a dying scream she sunk from the saddle to the ground, and becoming frightened, her horse dashed wildly away over the prairie.

Two more foes had the Spaniard, pressing him so hard that he could not use his revolver. Becoming desperate, as he saw that certain death was inevitable, unless he could make a break, he clubbed the revolver, and hurled it fiercely at the head of one of the herders, while at the same instant he took a backward step, and leaped upon the other.

The flying missile felled the one ruffian like a log to the ground.

Tearing the knife from the hand of the other, with strength prodigious, the gambler buried it into the outlaw's heart, and thus ended the unequal contest.

An hour later, just when the cold December sun arose gloriously from out its eastern bed, El Gamin approached a solitary cottonwood which stood miles inland from the Rio Grande, and whose wide-spreading branches looked cheerful.

Under the shelter of these he sat himself upon the grass, and busied himself in cleaning his weapons, which, of late, had done him such dreadful service.

Haggard and desperate the gambler was looking, from his wild, bloody night's work; blood was smeared upon his face and upon his garments, and he was suffering from many wounds and from fatigue.

"God forgive me!" he murmured, staring thoughtfully heavenward. "I wish I might hope for a place up there, where Deadwood Dick is so confident of going, on his execution. But it is not for such as me."

From among the branches of the tree, overhead, there descended a noosed rope and fell about the neck of the doomed gambler. He started violently, and attempted to throw off the thing, but it shirred quickly tighter, a choking sensation attacked him, and he was drawn bodily up into mid-air.

As he went up the man at the other end of the rope, which was over a stout limb, came gradually downward, until he touched the ground. Above him dangled the body of the gambler, with life by this time nearly choked out of him.

Nor did the strange hangman relent. He wound the slack rope about the foot of the cottonwood, and then, after giving a contemptuous glance at the unfortunate victim of lynch-law, he turned his footsteps in the direction of Del Norte.

And this individual who had suspended the Gambler Prince six feet above *terra firma*, with a rope about his neck, was no less a personage than the eccentric Arkansas Toothpick.

In the early morning following El Gamin's visit, Deadwood Dick was led forth from his tent, by a guard of soldiers, to the village plaza, which was in the center of the town. Here the military and townspeople were all assembled, to witness the merely formal trial of the daring ex-outlaw.

Curious eyes were bent upon the young man, for some signs of agitation were apprehended, but in this all were disappointed. Not a tremor passed over Harris's face, as he was placed upon the witness stand, confronted by the multitude; but he smiled and put out one released hand, as there was a parting in the crowd, and old Avalanche came up, followed by his goat.

"Great ham-bone thet Joner gnawed on!" was the old scout's greatly surprised exclamation. "Old Moses who at ther rushes and bulls did swar. How? which—how did ye git inter this tarmal predicament, boyee?"

Deadwood Dick laughed one of his peculiar expressive little laughs.

"Well, I got caught by these law-abiding emissaries of Uncle Sam, Alva, and they made bold to as-

sert that they wanted me, which assertion I could not gainsay; so, accordingly, I gave up, and let 'em take me into custody!"

"Which showed what a durn blasted fule ye aire. Great Jerusalem! I wouldn't 'a' thort it uv you!"

"But, you know, old friend, that I have nothing to live for. The faster pass the days, the more I want to be with Leone and my boy."

"Oh! ye'll git thar, no doubt!" Avalanche replied, grimly, "ef ye let these durned scullions hev their way about it. Let me jest put a lively flea inter yer organs o' hearing."

Saying which, the Annihilator whispered a few words in the prisoner's ear, that caused him to start violently, and grow white.

"Not dead—Leone not dead, you say?" he gasped, a wild, joyful, hopeful light shining from his eyes.

"I sed et, I reckon!" the veteran scout replied; "leastwise, thes 'ere paper lukes ruther suspiciously like it. Read," and he held a small strip of paper up so that Dick could see.

These were the words inscribed:

"Am a prisoner—for God's sake, rescue me from a horrible captivity. My captor's name is Hawk Harrington. Search for me in the Black Hills, whither he is taking me. LEONE HARRIS."

"Oh! heaven, I am to die, leaving her a prisoner!" Deadwood Dick groaned.

"Don't be ter sure o' thet, Dickey, boy. That's many a slip 'twixt the tarantler juice an' ther lip uv an absorber o' moisture, as hes often been proven, an' 'tain't sworn to thet ye're bound ter swing, yet. An' ef ye do, I'll find yer wife, an' take gude keer o' her. Great ham-bone, yes. But, good-by, now, fer them soldiers aire lukin' at me as ef I war a hoss-thief, instead uv a devastatin' epidemic o' ther peraries. Good-by, an' keep yer eyes open."

And giving Dick a warm hand-shake, the scout turned away and vanished in the crowd.

The trial was as quick as it was decisive. The Prairie court found Omaha Oil to be Deadwood Dick, and as Deadwood Dick had richly merited death a hundred times, he was now summarily ordered to be shot. The sentence, as pronounced by Fullerton was:

"I sentence you to death one hour hence. You shall be shot by six long-range rifles, in the hands of my sharp-shooters, at a distance of two hundred yards."

With these words the trial was ended, and the crowd gradually dispersed, evidently greatly pleased at the idea of this long-range practice on a human body.

Dick was taken back to his prison-tent, and left alone.

There chanced to be an ex-chaplain with the command, and he visited the prisoner and offered consolation, which Dick gratefully accepted. It seemed strange to him to be preparing for eternity. An hour ago he had rejoiced at the prospect of meeting Leone; now that she was living, he yearned to live, but it was too late. His sentence had been passed, and he would have no chance to escape.

Death stared him in the face, and he could but meet it.

But, naturally, he wondered where Old Avalanche was all this time. What mischief was the old King of Rangers planning?

That he was staying in the background without some purpose Dick was unwilling to think, and a strong hope arose in his breast that perhaps the old scout was planning for his escape.

But this hope was dissipated, when the soldiers came to lead him out to his execution. Nothing, now, thought he, could save him from death.

He was led through camp, and two hundred yards out upon the keen wintry prairie, where a stake had been driven, upon the edge of a rushing little tributary creek, which a mile below flowed into the Rio Grande del Norte.

To this stake he was firmly lashed with strong cords.

"I am sorry for you, young man!" Colonel Fullerton said, gravely. "It is a pity to see a young man like you shot when life is so precious."

"Oh! you needn't be. I don't hanker after your sorrow, nor your words of condolence!" Dick replied, coolly. "Probably, if I were to come to life after you end my days, I should be just mean enough to drop you off of the list of the living!"

"I guess you won't do any one any harm in the future!" was the grim attempt at satire of the colonel. "Will you have your eyes blindfolded?"

"No. I want to see the machine work!"

Accordingly Dick was left alone, tied to the stake, while the soldiers and the colonel retired to the shooting-line, full two hundred yards away.

While they were striding thither, a dripping human form crawled from the stream at Dick's back, and a familiar voice exclaimed:

"Courage, Dickey, boyee! I'll hev ye out o' this, d'rectly!"

Creeping into the tall grass at the back of the prisoner, the old Annihilator gave the cord a slash or two and Dick was free!

Sinking to the ground, he rolled into the stream, Avalanche on the lead, and an instant later they crept into the bushes on the opposite side of the stream, and almost the first warning the soldiers had, was, when on looking around at a shrill yell of defiance, they saw two horsemen spurring away, madly, over the prairie. Soon they passed wholly from view.

Omaha Oil, and the ex-road-agent, Deadwood Dick, and the Annihilator, Old Avalanche, disappeared, and nevermore were they seen in the country of the Rio Grande del Norte.

Beadie's Half-Dime Singer's Library.

FIFTY OR MORE SONGS IN EACH ISSUE.

Contents of No. 1.

Whoa, Emma (new version),
Ten minutes too late,
Miss Gruber's boarding house,
See that my grave's kept green,
The man in the moon is looking,
love,
"Twixt two stools a man goes to
the ground,"
Let the girls alone,
They all do it,
My pretty red rose,
Rose of Killarney,
Johnny, you've been a bad boy,
Whoa, Emma (original version),
Angel Gabriel,
Come, gang awa' w! me,
The railroad engineer's song,
Molly Bawn,
Cheer, boys, cheer,
I knew that I was dreaming,
Auld lang syne,
"Clicquot,"
Landlord, fill your flowing bowl,
A good time coming,
The nightingale's trill,
Co-ca-che-lunk,
Poor Jack,
Hoop-la,
Under the willow she's sleeping,
They borrow, but never return,
Sweet by and by,
Land of my birth,
Why can't I have a beau?
Roll out! heave dat cotton,
The butcher boy,
Waiting for papa,
Gay and happy,
The hazel dell,
The vacant chair,
Tom Bowling,
I muse on thee,
Pull down your vest,
Rhine vine Sharley,
Who will care for mother now?
Heather Jock,
"Crooked whisky,"
French and English,
Juliana Jones,
Barbara Allan,
Son of a gambler,
The midnight bugle,
Sing, birdie, sing,
The tempest,
Call me when breakfast is
ready,
Jim, the carter lad,
The drunkard's raggit wean!
Twinkling stars,
The Marcelline hymn,
Put me in my little bed,
The old English squire,
Lord Lovel,
Billy Larkin.

Contents of No. 2.

Captain Cuff,
You make me laugh,
When the pigs begin to fly,
My life is so awfully thin,
Babylon is fallen,
The fields of home,
Dandy Pat,
Beautiful Rose,
A cushion aig mochree,
Robinson Crusoe,
One by one they crossed the
river,
The march of the Cameron
men,
John Chinaman,
Bitter beer,
The style in which it's done,
Constantinople,
The five cent shave,
Jimmy's wooing,
Gentle Jennie Gray,
I'm looking at you now,
I know when I've enough,
George Constantine McKeown,
The merry widow,
The Donegan light guard,
The pilot,
Norah, the pride of Kildare,
Sweet vision of childhood,
Home again,
Shall we ever meet again?
You get more like your dad every
day,
The cracksman's chant,
Take it, Bob,
Dandy barber Joe,
Captain Spike of the musketeers
Limburger sheese,
Uncle Tom's lament,
Up and be doing,
The heathen Chinese,
Within a mile of Edinboro',
Rockaby, Lullaby,
The cork leg,
The soldier's tear,
I'm lonely since my mother
died,
Pull down the blind,
What were all the world without
thee?
The king's highway,
Captain Jinks,
The O's and the Mc's,
A motto for every man,
Her bright smile haunts me
still,
I'm a b'hoj,
Little waxed mustache,
The steam arm,
Single blessedness a fib,
Quit dat ticklin' me,
The sparkling solitaire,
May the best man win,
Beside the sweet Shannon.

Contents of No. 3.

The Gainsboro' hat,
Hildebrandt Montrose,
Mary McGinnis,
I do feel so awfully loose,
Is there any such place?
Cackle, cackle, cackle,
Bold Robin Hood,
He isn't as rich as he used to be,
Bryan O'Lynn,
He was such a nice young man,
Human nature,
Billy Grimes, the rover,
Sing! sing! sing!
Terrance Muldoon,
The fireman's boy,
The summer of love,
The runaway mare,
Peter Gray,
Mary of the wild moor,
Song of the locomotive,
Coaxing with a kiss,
Lager beer song,
Our army and navy of blue,
The roast beef of old England,
Maassa in de cold ground,
The timid awkward squad!
Nancy Lee,
Pink dominoes,
The boulevard,
It's nice,
Mine host! mine host! come, etc.
I'll be watching for you at, etc.
My brudder gum,
God bless the little church, etc.
One a flower there,
The low back'd car,
It's naughty, but it's nice,
I love my native land,
The Campbells are comin',
I'm in it,
The Yankee boy,
Mary Avourneen,
The fighting dog,
Red, white and blue,
When the flowers fall asleep,
Wakel Dinah, wake,
The brave old oak,
Yankee ship, and a Yankee crew,
Camptown races,
Why have my loved ones gone?
A national song,
The blarney,
Papa says I may,
Sprig of shillelah,
Shall we know each other there?
Good-by, John,
Old folks at home,
Father will settle the bill,
Whisper it softly,
Hail to the chief,
Little maid of Arcadee,
Juanita,
Never despair.

Contents of No. 4.

Johnny Morgan,
"Fifth avenue George,"
The king of trumps,
Broadway promenade,
Little green valley,
Oh! you pretty blue-eyed witch,
Sparkling moselle,
Looking back,
The ocean burial,
The Brooklyn fire,
After toiling cometh rest,
The miller of the dee,
A starry night for a ramble,
Pop goes the weasel,
"Our boys,"
The minute gun at sea,
Down the shadowed lane she goes
Lather and shave,
Good-by, Charlie,
Good-by till I see you again,
The other side of Jordan,
Mollie Brady,
Par excellence,
Few days,
Row, row,
In her "little bed" we laid her,
I am waiting, Essie dear,
You never miss the water, etc.
"I cannot sing the old songs,"
Whisperings of love,
The old oaken bucket which
hung in the well,
Bashful young man,
"Put the brake on when, etc.
The rollicking old man,
There are kisses waiting for me,
Hail, Columbia,
Sleight with my girl,
The monks of old,
Home, sweet home,
Adventures of Robinson Crusoe,
Hard times,
Rory O'Moore,
Auld Robin Gray,
Old Rosin the Beau,
The fine old English gentleman,
The fine old Dutch gentleman,
The fine old Irish gentleman,
The spider and the fly,
Blue-eyed violets,
Rosa Lee,
Faded flowers,
Spring, gentle spring,
Over the left,
"There's nothing succeeds like
success,"
The mocking bird,
The stylish servant girl,
Star-spangled banner,
Nelly was a lady,
The Irish regent,
Ridin' in a railroad keel,
Darling old stick,
Bob Ridley.

Contents of No. 5.

I'll strike you with a feather,
Haunting eyes,
The star that leads to thee,
Flow gently, sweet Afton,
The household clock,
Come to the ole gum tree,
Sleeping, I dreamed, love,
"Our laddie's dead, Jem,"
Oh! I shall call dada,
Buttercups and daisies,
Fair Rosabelle,
Annie Laurie,
Call her back and kiss her,
"Tilda Horn,"
'Twas like a spirit's sigh,
Bessy was a sailor's bride,
My heart's in the Highlands,
Jockey hat and feather,
Say, bird of summer,
Jeannette and Jeannot,
'Twas rank and fame,
The answer,
A sailor's life for me,
Kitty Kimo,
No one to be happy,
Uncle Ned,
The pirate's serenade,
Battle of the kegs,
Silver moonlight sea,
Isle of beauty,
"Sparkling Piper Heideschek,"
No one to be right, etc.
He led her to the altar,
Come where the moonbeams, etc.
The belle of the ball,
The sweet, sunny smile, etc.
Ship a-hoy!
My dear old mother,
Be sure you're right, etc.
Woodman, spare that tree,
Ten o'clock; or, remember, etc.
My eye and Betty Martin,
Sword of Bunker Hill,
Kate Kearney,
Answer to Kate Kearney,
The sea king's burial,
Good news from home,
Since Terry first joined the gang,
A bit of my mind,
I never refuse,
The old man's got to go,
Lord Bateman and fair Sophia,
To the love of my youth, etc.
Eulalie,
Don't marry your mother-in-law,
True blue, and seventy-two,
A thousand a year,
Twenty years ago,
Rather too heavy for me,
Be kind to thy father and mother,
Jamel!
Gentle Annie,
"Strike the iron while it's hot."

Contents of No. 6.

George, the charmer,
Wait till the moonlight falls on
the water,
"John Barleycorn is a hero
bold,"
Keep on kissing me,
I want to go home to mamma!
Kicking a man when he's down,
Nelly Gray,
Silver stars are softly gleam-
ing,
Mulcahy's home again,
Miss Malony's ball,
"A lock of my mother's hair,"
Alas! my love's away,
Over the mountain,
"The scamp,"
Answer to a thousand a year,
Ben Bolt,
Poor old slave,
Roger O'Malley,
By the sad sea-waves,
Song of Blanche Alpen,
Away down East,
Sweet long ago,
The little blacksmith,
Nelly Bly,
A life on the ocean wave,
Rock me to sleep, mother,
Clear the way,
Brown eyes has that little maid-
en,
Dear mother, I've come home to
die,
Lanigan's ball,
Don't you dare to kiss me, Joe!
Oh, merry hours!
I wish I was in Dixie's land,
I've only been down to the
club,
The merriest girl that's out,
Katy did, Katy didn't,
Finigan's wake,
"Unsociated love,"
I really don't think I shall
marry,
Poor Juneey,
The goat,
Base ball,
Beautiful dreamer,
My love is still the same,
"Free and easy,"
Merry little birds are we,
Boy with the auburn hair,
Evangeline,
Vegetable Joe,
Her pretty, smiling face,
Never venture, never win!
Ada, with the golden hair,
The dashing gay brunette,
Victorine,
Castles in the air,
The female smuggler,
Kind and true.

Contents of No. 7.

The belle of Rockaway,
Bathing in the surf,
Annie of the vale,
Awfully awful,
Spoonin on the sands,
Pretty as a picture,
Mother, dear, I'm thinking of
you,
That's the style for me, boys,
Little diamond dewdrop,
Taffy was a Welshman,
Take this letter to my mother,
Like a Turk!
Never push a man because he's
going down the hill,
America,
American vocal melody,
The blonde that never dyes,
Tassels on the boots,
My pretty little blonde,
The big sunflower,
Dat's der kind of mans I am,
Uncle Sam's farm,
Remember you have children of
your own,
He knows how to do it,
Winter—sleigh-bell song,
What is home without a mother,
Dreaming and drifting,
Bear it like a man,
The rollicking rams,
Grouse the griddle, birdie, Dar-
ling,
"Pulling hard against the
stream,"
The Mulligan guard,
Pretty little primrose,
I know you'll be true to me,
Robin,
The blue and the gray,
I hold the winning hand,
Take your coat up to your
uncle,
The old folks are gone,
Oh, Georgel beautiful Georgel!
Oh! I'm going home,
The little ones at home,
Wait for the wagon,
The belle of Pleasure bay,
Every inch a sailor,
Would you if you were me?
Crazy Jane,
See temp to me, speak,
Stick to your trade and be true,
Widow Maahree,
I'll remember you in my pray-
ers,
Marriage bells,
Mr. Finagan,
Jeremiah, blow the fire,
Come, maiden, with me,

Contents of No. 8.

Young fellow, you're too fresh,
I'll speak to you gladly again,
Good-by, lovely Lou,
Killarney,
Up with the lark in the morning,
Awfully fly,
Come sit by my side, little dar-
ling,
The finest police in the world!
Uncle Pomp's return,
That's the proper caper,
Call me your darling again,
I'm going home to Dixie,
The teetotal society,
The candidate for alderman,
Old Black Joe,
Our girls,
The young widow,
The little ones asleep,
"Come back to Erin,"
Minnie Dear,
Row, row your boat,
Wait for the turn of the tide,
Schaky Gratzenstein,
Nobody's darling but mine,
The city policeman,
Tra-la-la, George!
The belle of the day,
Pat Roach at the play,
Willie, we have missed you,
When the blossoms are white in
the orchard,
Only speak kindly to me,
Muldoon, the solid man,
Little more elder,
The dear little shamrock,
Dot German band,
My own, my guiding star,
There is no harm in kissing,
Kitty Clyde,
Jordan is a hard road to travel,
21. Hattie Mae,
On the bench at Long Branch,
When Brown comes rolling
home,
The Irish emigrant's lament,
Dat gay old nigger ball,
Would I were with thee,
The harp and sword of Erin,
"Oh would I were a bird!"
La-de-da-de Micks,
He isn't a marrying man,
Don't give up the ship,
Unhappy Jeremiah,
Happy Ezekiah,
Ennie Rooke,
"Ain't you awful,"
Our captain's last words,
My little wife ashore,
Brother's fainting at the door,
Bobbin' around,
One hundred years,
Those dark eyes,
Isn't he a darling?

Contents of No. 9.

Shy young girl; or, Du-da, da,
Dear old words,
Elly Darling,
Leaning on a balcony,
Echoes,
She was clerk in a candy store,
Write to me often, darling,
Up in a balloon,
Fat Mickey,
I'll meet you on Broadway,
The Hills of New England,
Dermot Astore,
The Pope he leads a happy life,
Ever of thee,
Fritz, wie gehts allewell!
Kiss me again,
I miss thee so,
Shakey Dinklespiel,
Uncle Ben, the Yankee,
Katy Darling,
The girl on the wire,
Your pocket-book is your, etc.
De ole corn mill,
My sweet Polywog,
I hear an angel sing,
The bell goes a-ringing for, etc.
Brother, tell me of the battle,
When the little birds are sing-
ing in the garden!
The old folks we loved long ago,
Not before Pa, dear,
Katie Lee and Willie Gray,
The bashful girl,
Whisky, you're the devil,
Still I love thee,
Casey's whisky,
Good-night,
Kafoodleum,
The gallant brigade!
When Johnny comes marching etc
Kitty McGee,
Hold the fort,
I wouldn't if I could,
Keep a little corner in your
heart for me,
The fellow that looks like me,
Will a monkey climb a tree?
"De bad Bob Lee,"
"Up a tree!"
Come home, father,
Chickabiddy,
The bird song,
Lora Vale,
Pretty Jemima, don't say no,
"Davy Jones,"
Merit commands success,
The diamond ring,
My own native land,
Evening Star,
Balm of the ocean,
Our Mary Ann,
My sweet girl,
Oh, let him rest,
The old farm house,
By de light of de moon,
Playing in the hay,
Shells of the ocean,
The old play ground.

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